

THE DIARY OF A RUSSIAN SPY

By
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PROLOGUE

I was on the run for most of my life.

I never had a day of peace, never had the luxury to decorate a house to live in, because from the age of twenty-three, I never stayed in the same place for more than two or three weeks. I could not own a car for too long- it was a great risk as my car would get tracked, followed and targeted. The joy of a wedding was absent from my life, and the hastily drawn ceremony which I eventually managed to arrange was marred by the deadliest gun fire and mortal assault.

I never had the satisfaction of holding my own child, never enjoyed the sunset without worrying about an assassin waiting to shoot me from the fading horizon, never could bask in a private beach for a tan without worrying a drone would strike and kill me and those around me in an instant. I never kept the curtains open for sunlight and never knew what it felt like to walk in the street without having to hide my face and identity.

Never had I the privilege to eat in a nice restaurant without my food order being drugged or spiked with nerve agents by paid waiters and chefs. I could never use a public restroom without being terrified of the person who walked inside the bathroom behind me. And finally, I could never trust anyone I talked to without thinking they have been paid to harm me or were hired men sent to kill me.

The attempts on my life had become so common that I had ceased being afraid of them. It was getting rather cumbersome to find a killer or assassin lurking at every corner. Whether it was embarking from a subway, or booking a motel, someone would creep up on me and attempt to thrust a bayonet into my entrails. I could no longer stand near windows without finding a bullet whizzing past me. The man, who I had considered to be a father figure, who hired these assassins to take my life, was relentless. What he gained by killing me was a mystery.

I was left to pursue my own life after the death of my parents. Unloved in an orphanage, I spent my adolescence in the middle of a snowy landscape in Siberia. The vast emptiness was an oppressive scene, adrift with abandonment and tragedy. I felt as though I was at the edge of the world and survived each day by reliving the memories of the love I had lost. But those memories too had to be suppressed.

Remembering my mother's beautiful face and kind smiles would overwhelm my mind, consuming my heart with grief. I knew there was no one to look out for me. So, fending for myself had become my second nature. But this time, it felt different. The sense of betrayal was so acute, I could hear it screaming in my head. The man who I trusted, and considered what could be closest to a father figure, had thrown me under the bus.

I was an indispensable shadow in his world and once I had outlived my usefulness, there was no reason for me to live. He wanted me out of his life, he wanted me to disappear from his daughter's life and finally he wanted me to suffer for taking away his little kingdom.

No matter how terrible his behavior was towards me now, I could not help recalling his past benevolence towards me. How could I forget the selfless way in which he offered to rescue me from the most frightful dynasty that I had ever been part of? He offered me a way out of the jaws of death- at a time when I was certain there was no hope for salvation.

October, 1975

After my mother died, and my stepfather was arrested for her murder, the court gave me only one choice: a shallow existence in an English orphanage. By sheer luck – or misfortune- I was removed from the state orphanage in London and shuttled to Moscow, the native home of my father's family. They briefly sheltered me under their roof until my welfare had become too cumbersome for them. My grandfather claimed that I was not from his bloodline and they changed my surname.

Without much fanfare, I was shipped off to a private children's house in eastern Siberian, thousands of miles away from the country where I was born. I didn't have my passport or any other document with me, for those documents were seized from me. I could not bear the dreariness that deluged the state housing, and by the time I reached my teen years, I had collaborated with a handful of young boys and began to search for an alternative living. When I had arrived at the USSR, there was a deficit of food and basic necessities at some locales, but the housing system for the poor was very advanced. The State looked after its own, and children who had no guardians or relatives to look after them, were placed under the care of the State authorities, who although tried to maintain highest standard of hygiene and provide adequate food and clothing, were indifferent to the orphan's tumultuous state of mind. I was increasingly homesick and longed for a utopian life in which my parents would rear me in comfort and love. The children's home was the only place I had known in Russia, and I gradually grew weary of the monotonous lifestyle in those plain brick houses, where affection was largely absent from daily life and discipline was an inseparable part of the education system I was undergoing. But I was not completely, for in the back of my mind, I had hope; a strong faith that I would travel around this vast nation and visit the towns and settlements that were growing near and far, from the steppes of Kazakhstan to the industrial areas of the Urals and beyond the Arctic Circle.

However, my brief period of tolerant lifestyle was soon over, when I was moved to a private orphanage, that was controlled and owned by some private denizens. There were no State regulatory board to ensure that the children received enough food and treatment, and I slowly saw how the state of living was gradually getting more and more deplorable, not only for myself but for my hapless peers as well. I don't know how I survived each winter at the private children's home. Snow and hail would batter the loose planks of our lodgings and icy rain seeped in, soaking the threadbare blankets that was infested with bedbugs. This was an utter change from my previous State housing where the Children's home was insulated with thick layers of concrete and stone, and was deloused and curated to ensure that the children residing in there did not succumb to death or diseases. Sadly, the same could not be said about the private institution I was in, and those who were in charge of my welfare cared little whether the children were ill or not. During winter, we did not have the comfort of encapsulating warmth of a fireplace. Utter exhaustion made us fall asleep periodically at night, momentarily ignoring the hunger that gnawed at our stomachs. I remember sleeping with my shoes on, trying to keep some of the coldness at bay, but my swollen feet would itch hysterically.

Daytime brought little relief to our dilapidated bodies. Excessive bites from the lice and bugs made the walks to the outhouse doubly difficult. Most of the orphans were suffering from scabies and jaundice. My heart ached particularly at the suffering of the disabled children who were housed along with us. Two-thirds of the children suffered from some sort of disability and as I later learned that it was not a coincidence that they all ended up in a State home. Some were not orphans- their parents lived in the impoverished areas of old cities and had given up their children soon after birth when visible deformities were noticed by the nurses or midwife.

Education was offered to us despite the strict living condition, and while I welcomed the opportunity to learn how to read and write Russian, it proved exceptionally difficult. In London, I had learned the English alphabets only, and in the children's home, everyone else knew how to read and write Cyrillic words. After the instructors gave me 2s several times, I worked harder to master the language and soon became fluent in Russian, because I did not want to get a grade that was the equivalent of an 'F'.

I don't know if it was due to social stigma or the lack of awareness that made their parents abandon them in a remote village in Siberia, but I would feel especially sorry for the children with Down's Syndrome. The fiercely affectionate adolescents somehow managed to communicate to us that they were always hungry. One evening, in the midst of the winter, I decided to help them. I collected

several boys from the orphanages and decided to venture outside. I was barely thirteen years of age, and my peers were slightly older. We agreed that something had to be done about the absence of food so we decided to go to the nearby markets.

The sojourn was more than useless. Shopkeepers shooed us away from the fish markets when they noticed we didn't have any money. I braved the evening blizzards and ignored the sharp icy wind that cut into my body like a razor as I returned to the orphanage crestfallen, my face streaked with angry tears.

I looked at the boys. They too have been crying. I noticed their puffy faces glow with hot anger and disappointment.

The next time, I decided to go out alone and search for food for my young comrades. I began early the next day. I marched in the waist deep snow for miles, climbing strenuously over the muddy hills that had frozen into rock-hard dark mounds. Twice, I wanted to turn back to the relative warmth of the hut but the round eager faces of my less advantaged comrades compelled me to go on. I knew I must return with *some* kind of provision for those helpless children.

For hours, I searched. There was nothing in this side of the city. I had to go to the other end of the village. Inhaling deeply, I tugged my thin coat around my body as tightly as possible and bracing the icy wind, crossed the narrow, frozen river. My icy feet hurt severely, causing tears of pain to fill my eyes. But the cold dry wind didn't allow me the luxury to cry. My tears froze before they could spill over my cheeks.

I was hungry and became thirsty from exertion, so I scooped handful of snow and ate it while I trekked. Several lines of frozen fish markets were scattered across a main road. I loitered around the area for a long time, collecting whatever slices of fish fell to the snow. I waited for sudden gusts of wind to blow away the dried fish from the display lines of the market front. My efforts paid off and I managed to stuff a handful of frozen fish inside my jacket. But the sky was getting dark and the cold air threatened to freeze my skull; I could barely think. Trembling with cold and exhaustion, I returned through the bleak landscape, clutching the few pieces of bread and dried fish I managed to gather from the various shops.

Проклятая жизнь

Тепло моих встречаю я друзей
Фальшивую улыбкою своей,
Глазами мокрыми в сторону глядя –
Так с детства боль скрываю я.
Откуда им понять, как, чувства заперев
И сердце цепью пережав, я много лет
Бессильно провожал своих родных,
Когда на смерть приказом гнали их.

Я тихими слезами
Оплакивал моих
Товарищей младых.
Подумай для себя:
Ну кто же будет плакать,
Когда умру сам я?

Я никто, и зовут меня никак.

Когда-то был я полон любовью

О всем, о чем мечтал, я помню.
Помимо мертвых братьев о том скорбит мой дух,
Как все мечты и грезы мои разбились в прах и пух.

Настало время мне на суд явиться к Богу.

В порывах зимней вьюги
Снег в воздухе кружил,
И друг меня на праздник
В тот вечер пригласил.
Я отказал от грусти
Себя в душе кляня:
Вдруг грусть моя допустит
Слезами отдать меня?

Позже в ночь, глубже в метель, дальше от сердца.

Сомкнувши веки встретил я
Мороз той зимней вьюги.
Вдруг – день! – и по щекам, горя,
Скатились слезы-злюки.
Боль по моим братьям
Мою сковала грудь.
И я рыдал по братьям,
Не в силах продохнуть.

До той поры, пока не перестало горюющее сердце мне беречь нутро.

Мысли сбивали с ходу,
Разум потери нес,
Но чувства слили воду
Невыплаканных слез,
И сердца боль по детству
Сменилась пустотой.
Реветь теперь не к месту –
Мертв всякий мне родной.

When I returned to the children's home, my peers huddled around me, taking whatever small pieces of food I could hand over to them. It was not enough for all of us, but somehow, we all shared happily. That evening, I felt at home for the first time. Despite being born and raised in London, I saw myself as a true Russian boy. These children were my comrades, my brothers. With sudden astonishment, I realized that I loved them like my own family. The sufferings did not ease overnight but I tried not to be affected by them. The cold was still a formidable foe. The frostbite in my feet festered and I learned to live with the pus-encrusted wounds.

By mid-October, we began to notice our clothes becoming moldy from the cold. Several of the children had mittens but the rest braved the Siberian winter with bare hands. Our frozen fingers would crack in places from the bitter cold but hardly anyone complained. I could feel the powerful love among the children- strengthening our resolve to survive. For months on end, I continued collecting food for the children at the orphanage. We managed to find large fishes and traded them with shop owners. Occasionally, we used the money to purchase local delicacies such as thin, long-sliced frozen fish and potatoes.

Meanwhile, I focused more and more on my education. The instructors at the private children's home encouraged us to learn the art of language, and soon, they taught me how to write aesthetically in cursive. It was an arduous process, because in order to ensure we wrote beautifully, pens were nonexistent, and the children were forced to write with quill pens, but I glowed inwardly with pride after I had secured several 4s, and 5s in my classes. Those grades were equivalent to A and B in English schools.

My fifteenth birthday was in the midst of the winter but my Russian comrades celebrated the day with much fanfare and somehow managed to get me a new fur coat. It was the first piece of clothing I owned in years that was not infested in lice or bugs. I was humbled and grateful. The new piece of clothing was more than a mere lifesaver in the winter- I wore it to travel farther down the villages and cities. In the city center, I became acquainted with other children who lived in the streets. I was impressed by their skills and ideas. Soon, I found myself joining them in their nightly excursions. Only, not all of their activities were strictly harmless.

One excursion led to another until I had become embroiled in an ugly robbery. I was unaware that my comrades were intending to rob a bank, but by the time I discovered their intentions, it was too late to pull out then. True to my fears, there was a shootout with police, and while my comrades escaped, I stayed behind to check if the bank manager who had been shot was still alive. This was a folly. My delay caused the police to find me near the murder weapon and a corpse.

It did not take long for a Russian court to condemn me to the execution chamber. When the judge delivered his verdict, I couldn't control myself. Hysterical from fear and anger, I struggled to run away from the room but the burly guards grabbed my arms, pinning me to the wooden benches. My legs flaying all over the bench, I shouted and yelled at the judge, accusing him of lying about me. My outburst did not impress the staff and I was dragged away from the courtroom in chains.

I was barely seventeen when this incident took place.

The dispassionate look on the judge's face had perturbed me from the first day in court. The clerk and other spectators, or the lack thereof, seemed doubly suspicious. Of course, it would be only after many months that I would be able to find out what this place actually was: a sector of a clandestine program that functioned as a fake court, but used genuine insignias and settings to resemble courtrooms, so that the unsuspecting victim, like myself, would succumb to threats and coercion.

When the judge did not change his sentence, I immediately became alarmed for I knew that the Soviet Union never sentenced adolescents to death. Individuals under the age of eighteen were routinely sent to rehabilitation centers, or in the case of severe crimes, were ordered to remain in a juvenile home.

This setting was bizarrely unusual. Somehow, the death penalty committee agreed to use a concentration of sodium pentothal for the execution. I screamed all the way to the execution room, struggling to get free, crying futilely for my dead mother. In my young mind, I believed my mother could have saved me from this peril. For the first time in my young life, I felt shipwrecked by my fate, abandoned by family and friends on the desolate shore of death, with only pain and misery stretching endlessly before me.

My cries of desperation were drowned by the growling of the executioners who were leading me to the doomed chamber. When they strapped my lean body to the gurney, I passed out in fright before they actually emptied the syringe's content in to my blood stream.

Жизнь-предательница

**Судьба моя обернулась враньем,
Но мир смотрел на нее как на курьез;
Рождались незвано и без горя помрем,
Мы в диковинном мире несбыточных грез.**

When I awoke, I was certain that I was in the after-life. The white-tiled room must have been heaven, because hell could not be so cold and quiet. I found myself lying on a cot, locked inside a rectangular windowless room. Then I heard the locks jingle outside the door and a man entered. He was of medium height, very blond hair and bright blue eyes. He looked human enough but his intimidating posture frightened me. The man said nothing and slowly slid a printed photo on the bedside table next to me. It was a still shot image of a cemetery. I peered at the plot number, counted the rows, and finally saw the carvings on the headstone. My name was carved on it. The date of death was the day I had been executed, or I thought I had.

In speaking plainly, I hoped to avoid any premonitions of doubt or deceit, as these pages bear witness to the misfortune of my past and the callous conditions of my life. Long ago, I had ceased to hope. For years, I resigned myself to the eternal anguish of the years. No more do I call upon the Deity and expect reprieve. The miseries that had governed my life since the day I was born had made me partially indifferent to scorn and praise, and in my restless destitution, I own nothing but my humble and mangled memories. I am well aware that the kind reader would likely be a complete stranger to the complexity of my sorrows. My own insignificant efforts at consoling the distress of my heart had too often failed miserably, and now, as I embarked on the arduous journey of retelling my tale, I do not wish to place a claim upon the reader's sympathy for I do not have the right, nor do I feel that I deserve it. The immeasurable despair that deluges my mind would not become any more bearable if I communicate my sentiments to the oblivious world.

My heart was pierced with sorrow at the very contemplation of my life. My past was unforgiving in its torment. I would imagine that I was living in a very polarized society, and in every step, I faced obstacles. Bloodshed was baked into the active missions I had to undertake, and this I knew, and had no incompatible visions of the future. I was at a loss to determine how to live an honorable life without sacrificing the basic legitimacy of my existence. My mind is often frozen in wonder at the mere fact that I am still alive, in spite of the dreadful existence that had placed me most unceremoniously in a pedestal on pain and penance.

For me, forgiveness was not an interpersonal act but what were the limits of forgiveness in this deeply polarized society I was living in? I could not help but wonder if forgiveness and accountability were compatible. Yes, Richard had betrayed me, and yes, he caused me more pain than I care to remember, but was I wrong in trying to define him by his worst manifestations, and would my soul survive without forgiveness?

Thus runs my narrative- a tale so bizarre and drear, that even the lighthearted optimist would cringe in wonder and disbelief. I have faced such torment every day, until joys of childhood disappeared from my life and transformed my adolescence into a desert of despair. The bloom of boyhood was wrested from my helpless grasp and all warm sentiments were extinguished one by one. Had one phrase of my story been unsubstantiated, the altruistic reader may have rejected my testimony as implausible for indeed, how could the experience of an ordinary human be marked with such telling episodes? But I have taken care to corroborate each word, to offer explanation for each action, and give descriptions where applicable, and with this, I resume my story, a tale so aloof from the rest of mankind, that I must tread - and tell with care.

Mercy is my Refuge...

O glorious ones who never have to weep-
Whose lives are untouched by sorrow's dart,
Who sing the notes of shared felicity,
Whose woes are not stored in the heart!

The fortune of laughter is lost to me,
For I have nothing in life to cheer,
My broken heart- marred by adversity,
Has made my life so cold and drear.

April, 28

I was given the chilling choice of returning to my grave- this time quite literally- or work for the organization that had rescued me from the death chamber. It wasn't really a choice; to be honest, it felt like an ultimatum. I agreed to serve them.

My training began the very next day.

In the camouflaged courtyard of the Camp, I was introduced to various techniques of fighting. I learned hand-to-hand grappling and weapon disarmament, as well unauthorized combat style. The weapons training was always conducted with live rounds. I exerted myself to the limit and continued to excel in most fields.

The stocky man with ice-blue eyes who had first persuaded me to join the training was always at a distance, watching like an eagle. The slightest weakness was noticed.

Endless hours of weight lifting, grueling physical exercises and delicate target practicing became the norm. Each week, we would be introduced to different martial arts and wrestling techniques from around the world.

As it turned out, the blue-eyed man was my personal handler; a ruthless trainer who worked me along with the other recruits in the most back-breaking manner. His name was Mikhail, but he wanted us to address him as Michael because we were practicing to become fluent in the English language. No exercise or routine was taken lightly. If I panted or had to catch my breath after a bout of training, he would call me out to do additional runs.

If you had trained hard enough, then you wouldn't be struggling to catch your breath, Mikhail used to say. I resented the strict order and often, when it was my turn to engage in a duel or hand combat, instead of fighting in the boxing ring, I would resort to ballet dancing, demonstrating moves I had learned from my ballerina mother. Mikhail would be unimpressed by my transgressions and often doubled my practice but I was still reluctant to accept the new life at the Camp. It made me feel sorely trapped.

I qualified to become an operative after completing only six months of training. Michael was openly proud of my accomplishment and after planting a tracking chip in the tip of my spine, he referred me to the director of the Camp, a former colonel who had served for decades in the KGB. The colonel gave me my first assignment: enter a restaurant and assassinate a former State Duma deputy. I was told that the target was allegedly involved in illegal weapons trade. At the age of nineteen, graduating fresh from a militarized school, I never thought to question my leaders. I believed in what the colonel said. My target was an evil man who needed to be eliminated.

Michael dropped me off in front of the restaurant and handed me a weapon; a P-96 pistol. He warned me that this was a test. I had five minutes to eliminate the target and return to the car. After that, Michael would leave and I would be on my own. He insisted that the first mission was always a test to assess the recruit. If I was unsuccessful, then I would likely be canceled. I learned many months later what the term canceled implied.

I entered the high-end restaurant and saw my target seated at the rear of the dining space. He was surrounded by eight bodyguards. I contemplated on my options. Shooting an unarmed man in a public place was an unpleasant task; still I had to do what needed to be done. I stood at a distance and tried to aim. Despite six months of training and passing shooting practices with flying colors, I was being unable to shoot the man who was blissfully dining with his men. After a minute of hesitation, I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. I missed, of course. But that was the beginning of a carnage that would have unfolded. I opened my eyes and pressed the trigger, but heard only empty clicks. The gun Michael gave me didn't have any bullets.

I breathed in relief. I didn't have to kill anyone.

However, my comfort was short-lived. In my zeal to carry out the mission, I had neglected to notice the diners who were whispering, pointing to the raised pistol in my hand. My target glanced up and saw me holding the gun and he shouted to his body guards. They moved with lightning speed and extracted automatic sub-machine guns from their coats and began to throw volleys of bullet at me. I froze momentarily, but then my training kicked in. I dropped to the ground and rolled over until I found cover behind the restaurant's bar. Gunfire continued at my direction, and I finally ducked from behind the table and tackled one of the guards, seized his weapon and returned fire. I don't remember how long it took for me to safely exit the restaurant, but the confrontation was very bloody. Most of the diners had fled the room and my target along with his eight body guards were dead. I stood frozen, looking in horror at the carnage. I couldn't believe I was responsible for the death of these people. It was hard not to double over and puke. Then I heard the police sirens, and knew I had to flee.

I raced outside. Michael was gone. There was no way to return to the Camp. I trashed my weapon and set out on foot, arriving at the Camp five hours later. When I entered, I saw Michael waiting in the lobby. He looked disappointed and told me I was late. The assignment was to be completed in five minutes. Until that moment, I was forcing an artificial calm to possess me, but his voice made me snap. I grabbed Michael and tried to choke him. I screamed at him for betraying me, for giving me a gun that had no bullets, for

making me kill all those innocent people. Michael was stronger and overpowered me. He said I was weak and didn't have what it takes to become an international Russian operative. The mission was a test to see if I was able to function under duress. Apparently, returning to the Camp in one piece and alive meant that I had passed. Seventy percent of the recruits die in their first assignment.

This was the first of many assignments I had to carry out. Often, it was an assassination. Other times, I was instructed to break into a warehouse and gather information. On rare occasions, the colonel asked me to infiltrate a criminal gang in order to find the identity of its leader or patrons. While many of the Camp's targets were mob bosses and drug dealers, some were honest politicians whose opinions did not agree with the Colonel's. He wanted us to be obedient killing machines who would take out his enemies for him. I was dissatisfied with my duties. I did not want to take the life of another human being, but the orders were iron clad. Noncompliance was punished most severely. In the first few months, I noticed new recruits disappear into the abyss of the Camp. I was later told that they were canceled.

Anyone whose performance was below average was deemed unworthy to live. My initial performance was unsatisfactory and as a result, I was sent on no-contest missions for six months in a row. Mikhail, my personal instructor who had recruited me to this Camp, was seized by a moment of compassion, and accompanied me on my first death-mission. He saw how I struggled to breach perimeters of the heavily fortified buildings that were most likely criminal hideouts. I saw the new recruits, my comrades who were just as petrified as I was, perish beside me but could not muster the courage to fire my weapon. Mikhail took pity on me and instead of reporting my failure to the Colonel, he covered for me and began to accompany me in most of those suicide missions. Statistically, there was only one percent chance of anyone coming out of those jobs alive, but I survived.

What I was being summoned to do was unmitigatedly antithetical to my nature. I was ordered to kill people who were not my enemies, to destroy the lives of those who had done no harm to me. The former KGB Colonel explained they were enemy of the State but that was something my young mind could not discern. When I questioned his orders, he declared that we were at war and those targets must be eliminated. We received printed pictures of men or women who had to be taken care of, eliminated so that the Soviet Union could be safe from their sabotage. Occasionally, we were commanded to familiarize ourselves with the target's profile. Some were engineers working at a power station or a nuclear plant. A politician in Latvia. An owner of a pharmaceutical company in Ukraine. They did not look like warriors who could harm either the Colonel or the motherland. I didn't want to be a part of that anonymous war.

I wasn't until my second year of training that the ominous realization sunk in- since the beginning of my training, I had deduced from the Colonel's unsanctioned activities, that he was not part of the Soviet government's covert intelligence programs. I was right, it seemed. The central government had disavowed him years ago but that didn't stop the resolute former Soviet officer from carrying out his own dramatic operations. He evaded KGB scrutiny by conducting most of his leg work from East Germany where he had been the liaison officer at the Stasi headquarters in Lichtenberg. In addition to spending most of his time in East Berlin, the Colonel trained recruits within the barbed fence of his hilltop castle at the banks of the Spree River.

I wholeheartedly despised my job. It often entailed executing unarmed men. Several times, I allowed my would-be-victims to escape, even handing them some get-away money. Where I got that kind of cash with me was another issue. Prior to a mission or operation, Dustin and I used to collaborate on the planning or the infiltration of a criminal group. We would trace their digital footprint and Dustin used his exceptional technical skills to siphon off some portion of their illegal black money to an off shore account. Soon, there were over five separate accounts that I personally managed. Dustin had his own share of money from the raids I conducted. I was not unhappy with the results. The jobs were risky. The colonel would send entire tactical teams to raid the headquarters of criminals, but only a handful of men would return from the operations. More often than not, they would be caught in the crossfire and get wounded or maimed. Getting severely injured in the job was fatal. The colonel did not tolerate mistakes or weaknesses. He would cancel anyone who failed three successive missions.

I was oddly lucky, or unlucky to be alive and unharmed for so long. It meant I wouldn't be killed by the colonel but it also meant that I would have to be the executor of scores of other men, some of whom might well be innocent. These thoughts haunted me every time I was sent out of the Camp. I continued seizing huge lumps of cash and other valuable and shipped them to my bank accounts in Thailand and Netherlands. To my knowledge, these two countries were the only one which had untraceable banking records. Dustin helped me set up the accounts in such a way that the colonel would never be able to trace it.

It was not sheer greed that drove me to steal the money from the criminals. I had always planned and dreamed of leaving the colonel's Camp one day, before I he made me kill too many people, before I lost my soul completely. I knew I needed to purchase the highest quality of forged papers and assume numerous false identities and even change my physical appearances permanently. I needed untraceable cash for that, and the Camp paid its employees a very meager salary, and that too with a prepaid credit card. Everything we purchased was monitored by the central command center. Every recruit was given a furnished apartment on the outskirts of Moscow, but I discovered on my first day that the entire apartment was bugged with hidden cameras and microphones. Removing them would alert

the colonel that I was up to some renegade plan so I sought Dustin's help. He promised to make me an interfering device that would jam the microphones temporarily each time I switched it on. We were never free. Not for a moment. But for those few minutes the jamming device was active in my room, I could speak knowing no one else was overhearing.

May, 19

One of the assignments I was entrusted with was happening in the United States. Cybersecurity experts at the Camp furnished me with false papers and identities. I was given an American name and practiced speaking American English and the various local dialect. Since I still looked relatively young, I was sent to America as an eighteen-year-old high school senior. My papers were legitimate. The absence of a guardian or parent was explained in the document which stated that I was under state orphanage care. Michael assured me that as soon as I landed in New York airport, I would be received by other Russian sleeper agents who had already settled into the American lifestyle. They would help me settle into my new life.

Privately, I was relieved. Having to kill dozens of people each month was painful. Although I was sure my targets were convicted criminals and mob bosses, it was still an unpleasant task to take the lives of those who were unarmed. I hoped leaving Russia meant some level of freedom for me. I had a faint hope of becoming free.

My arrival in New York was unceremonious. There was not much to do. The Camp sent word that I was to lay low and blend in with the locals. I resumed my high school status and interacted sparingly with other students. It was on one of my walks from high school that I came across a couple who was crossing the street. The woman looked inexplicably familiar.

On closer inspection, I noticed that she was Russian. A familiar face from home, I thought instinctively, and followed them to a distance. It happened that the couple resided only three blocks from my school district. In the following few months, I had seen the woman strolling through Manhattan's parks, but she was accompanied by a young boy around ten years of age. He was exactly my size when my own mother had died a decade ago. I was perplexed but soon found out the real story behind her new son. The couple had adopted two children and were raising them as my own. I marveled at the luck of the small boy who was now living with the Russian woman and her husband. Although I was no longer a little boy, I wished I had a loving home, someone who would love me unconditionally, as their own child.

I don't know what exactly it was that made me nostalgic, but seeing the woman reminded me distinctly of my own mother who I had lost as a child. This gave me hope, making me realize maybe there was some good left in this world. Maybe there was hope for me to lead a different life.

Meanwhile, I had graduated from high school, as per my American cover, I was instructed to begin college in New York. It was during the first semester that my first assignment came. Michael had mailed a coded document from the Camp that gave me a list of men our colonel needed to eliminate. Two of my targets were American politicians whose interests clashed with ours.

I began preparing for the mission and when the opportunity presented itself to me, I zeroed in on my target. I tracked one of the politicians to a baseball game. He was attending the game accompanied with his son. I positioned myself across the stadium and took aim when my sight fell on the child seated next to the politician. His son was engrossed in deep conversation with him. I aimed my gun but hesitated in pulling the trigger. How would the little boy feel if he saw his father die on front of him? It would be too traumatic, so cruel. No, I would rather wait until the politician was alone.

But the game ended and the man left the stadium with his son. For the next whole week, I scoured for an opportunity to take him out, but he was surrounded by stringent security and I never got the chance of approaching the politician. Meanwhile, Michael sent a warning message to me that week. The colonel was getting impatient that I was not being able to carry out my assignment. Three out of four targets were still living.

Clearly, the American government functioned differently from other countries. When they noticed one of the prominent politicians had been assassinated, they beefed up security for everyone else. It was getting harder to locate the other men and find a suitable place to eliminate them. My Soviet employers were not interested in excuses; they wanted results. I decided to act rashly and followed one of the targets to his hotel in Washington D.C. and booked a room in his floor. As I was preparing my sniper rifle, dozens of men came from the shadows, from behind the couch, inside the closets, and like a nightmare, they bound me tightly and blindfolded me, before transporting me to an undisclosed location.

I was inside a dark metal-lined room. When my eyes finally adjusted to the dim interior, I noticed a man seated across me behind the fixed table. I struggled to get to my feet, but my hands were fastened to the table top with steel cuffs. The man waved at me to remain seated and introduced himself. He was a thick heavy-set man, dressed in fine clothes and wore an expensive hat. He said he was the director of America's National Security Agency, or the NSA, and was in charge of keeping his country safe. His department was a

clandestine section of the NSA that conducted off the book operation abroad and he was exclusively in charge of the unique black ops program.

The refined man spoke with a mild accent. I thought it sounded Austrian. He told me that few people in the world knew he existed but he seemed to know everything about me; my name, the location of my Camp, and even knew more about the former KGB colonel than myself. He told me he knew that I had killed one American politician, and was about to assassinate another. I knew the punishment for murder was death, so I begged the man to spare my life. I swore to him in all honesty that I wanted to leave the Camp ever since I had arrived in the States. I never wanted to kill another human being, but disobeying the colonel's orders were not an option. I had to do as I was told.

He listened impassionedly to my pleas, then suddenly his demeanor changed. He ordered one of the guards to unlock my cuffs and told me I was free to go. He would make sure the U.S. government never found out that I had assassinated the politician. I stood in disbelief. Was I getting another chance in life?

"There is one condition," he told me. "The organization you work for has been black listed by the American and the Russian government for many years now. We have kept you under constant surveillance since the day you landed in the U.S. and we are aware that there are multiple Soviet sleeper agents who have been trained in the Camp currently occupying key positions in our government. If you help us bring the rogue colonel and his camp down, we will grant you immunity and offer you a fresh start."

I readily agreed with the man and offered my assistance. There was nothing I wanted more than to stop the killing cycle. I didn't want to be an assassin. I just wanted to be free. I told intelligence officer about the tracker that had been implanted in my neck. The NSA black ops director said he knew about that as well, and he wanted me to return to Camp headquarters in Russia and get the names of all the agents they had sent abroad. My contact in Moscow would be a senior lieutenant who worked in Ninth Directorate of the KGB. Fifteen officers from the Kremlin regiment would watch over me to make sure the Colonel did not suspect me in any way.

Meanwhile, I was instructed to follow all of the colonel's instructions to the letter, as not to arouse suspicion. I nodded, trying to realize my position. From this day on, I was to be a double agent. A traitor. If caught, I could be tried as a spy in Russia and convicted of treason, an offense punishable by death.

It would be better not to think about the dilemma I was heading into.

My life as a double agent did not appear too different from the previous life-style I was accustomed to. Michael was a little surprised when I requested to return to the Camp. I hadn't killed the politicians, but the NSA black op division chief gave a false news to the media leaking that the three men who were my targets had already died. The colonel was pleased with my performance and promoted me to the rank of a senior agent. I was given charge of new recruits as well as granted numerous assignments in Paris, Berlin and London.

I was in constant contact with the NSA black ops director. He gave me periodic assignments and related the information I gave him to the U.S. government. They were able to apprehend several high-profile Russian sleeper agents in New York and Washington. The colonel once more sent me to the United States to oversee an operation. I went straight to the NSA office and told them everything I learned while at the Camp. From the evidence the NSA's clandestine operation director shared with me, it seemed that the colonel was involved in a lot of illegal activities.

I was shocked to learn that the Colonel was not in any of the Soviet intelligence's database because he was disavowed by his own government and was stripped of his title and authority, but that didn't stop the highly efficient man from augmenting his activities. He created the Camp in which he recruited unsuspecting but talented young Russians like myself and made them do his bidding. The NSA black ops director showed me evidence that the Colonel had received funding from Eastern European arms dealers and was actively involved in overthrowing democratic governments of several South American nations. He also made me and other recruits assassinate many innocent leaders and politicians. Meanwhile, as a senior agent of the camp, I finally learned of what happens when a recruit fails an operation. They are indeed canceled. Except, when the colonel cancels someone, they are not allowed to walk out or resign. They are immediately taken to an underground vault, where the tracking chip that are planted at the base of their skull, is activated.

The tracking chip is infused with a small amount of industrial grade explosives, and when it detonates, little remains of the head. The recruit dies instantly. I found this practice to be so cruel that I attempted to stop it. But I remembered my status as a double agent made it very difficult. Resisting the colonel's directive could expose me as a traitor. I too would be canceled.

This time, when I returned to America, I begged the NSA director to help me remove the tracking chip from the back of my neck. He agreed to have the best surgeons examine me. I told him how deadly the microchip was and attempting to remove it would alert the Colonel that I was compromised.

The NSA director allayed my fears and put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry, son," he said almost in a paternal way. "I am going to make sure everything is taken care of."

My eyes watered when he spoke. In my twenty years of life, no one had spoken to me with such warmth and compassion. I never had a father who said one kind syllable to me. The warden of my orphanage addressed the children with ear-splitting shrieks and curses. I never knew what it was like to be treated kindly. Nobody ever called me their son- my own father belittled and beat me until my body was painfully bruised. My last memory was of my father trying to kill me. He had actually pulled the trigger, and had it not been for my mother's intervention, I would not be standing here today. My dear mother, the angelic woman who I sorely missed every day, used her body to shield me from the bullet that was supposed to be my doom. Since that day, my life knew only horror.

These thoughts tumbled through my mind as I wondered what had changed so dramatically in my luck that I would have someone who actually cared for me. There was someone who called me his son! I looked away before the NSA director could see the tears of joy spilling from my eyes. My heart was surcharged with gratitude as I silently hoped he would become the father figure I sorely missed my entire life.

Perhaps he realized I was overwhelmed with emotion and he put an arm around my shoulder briefly before ordering me to return with him to his farm house in rural Virginia.

It was in this house in Virginia that I met the most beautiful and charming young woman. The dark-haired beauty welcomed me into the house. Her name was Cynthia. Later that day, I learned that she was the NSA director's daughter. We talked for many hours that day and her father finally said it was time for me to leave. I looked forward to the next occasion that I could return to the farm house. In our consecutive meetings, Cynthia told me a great deal about her life. Her mother had left when she was a young girl, and her father had raised her by himself. He was the kindest man she knew, and Cynthia soon wanted to be like her father and get involved in the law enforcement agency. She thus joined the CIA as a field operative.

Most of the week-days, Cynthia lived in her father's stately farmhouse. I found myself spending more time in Virginia. Soon, every time I was sent on a mission to rescue a double agent from the Russian consulate or retrieve a stolen government document, Cynthia would volunteer to accompany me. I felt alive in her company. It was refreshing to have a life where there were no secrets. She knew about my origins and she also knew that I was trying to become free of my previous Soviet life in which I was coerced into becoming a hitman for a corrupt Colonel.

Nearly two years of undercover work had paid off, and the colonel along with the Camp was disintegrating. Officials at the KGB headquarters in Lubyanka Square were actively involved in tracking down the Colonel's associates and creating new identities for the recruits the rogue colonel had trained and coerced into working for him. It was a large operation, one that required comprehensive cooperation of the American intelligence agencies and the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* who had until then been solely occupied in rooting out the activities of anti-Soviet reformers in Poland and other neighboring states. By using backup from the NSA's director, I was able to identify the base of operation of the man who had recruited me from prison. The Colonel had operating camps inside numerous Soviet satellite republics and was actively engaged in anti-Soviet activities.

It was fortunate that the Soviet government wanted to neutralize him as much as the American government did and I was eager to bring a criminal of his stature to justice. But repatriation is not always simple in the world of espionage and soon, the question of what would happen to the hundreds of recruits and trainees who were working under the Colonel became a focal point. I tried desperately to secure state pardon for them and even discussed the possibility for migration. The NSA director, though grateful for my services, refused any suggestion of bringing several hundred highly skilled Soviet spies into mainland United States.

As we identified each sector of the Colonel's program, my thoughts returned increasingly to my comrades who were still trapped in the rogue spy center and who worked diligently, risking their lives - thinking they were serving the Soviet Union. I wanted to save those comrades who had fallen into the trap I was in, but I had no way to warn them. If I alerted the recruits that the former KGB colonel that commanded them was acting under false pretenses, it would make him run for the hills, ruining any chance of prosecuting him. On the other hand, it pained to sit by and watch the new recruits go about their daily missions, many of which were clearly illegal.

When the CIA and the NSA expressed inability to assist me regarding my Russian comrades, I spoke with my handler in the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* and in exchange of my cooperation, I requested that the unsuspecting recruits be granted immunity from prosecution. After nearly a month of negotiation, the committee agreed to accommodate the Camp's recruits but with strict conditions. The government felt it was too delicate to have formerly incarcerated individuals to be out on the streets of Moscow, especially since most of the agents had been officially dead. The KGB contended to furnish them with new identities and allow them to assimilate into the society as new individuals.

Meanwhile, I continued to shuttle back and forth from Moscow to Virginia to receive intel and orders. In one of the final weeks, I returned to the Camp to set timed explosives in the munitions room, so that in case of a raid, the entire weapons system would be malfunctioning. However, while I was readying the device, I was intercepted by a recruit who immediately cornered me and drew out his gun and took me to the cub-level holding cell.

The colonel was informed of this and personally came to interrogate me. I denied that I was planting bombs. I told the colonel that I merely found it and was attempting to disarm it when the recruit noticed me. The colonel doubted my words. I think it was because many of the targets that he assigned to me recently died suspiciously, and on more than one occasion, they were sighted the day after I had supposedly killed them. It was the NSA director who had arranged for such theatrics.

Each time I received the name of an assassination target from the colonel, I relayed the information to NSA. The director then used his handpicked men to fake their deaths so that the colonel could believe that I had done my job properly. Now, as I lay strapped in the gray room, a term we used in the Camp as the torture chamber, I wondered what would happen to me. The colonel brought in two hardened interrogators who carried briefcases full of needles and pliers. There were at least six different colored liquids. I did not know what the colored solutions would do to my body, but I certainly didn't want to find out.

The senior interrogator injected me with a bright yellow liquid. I recognized it as a pain desensitizer. It was designed to keep a prisoner from passing out in pain when they were tortured severely. I didn't want to think about what was going to happen next. The second interrogator removed a plier from the briefcase and wordlessly fixed it over my finger and abruptly yanked the nail of my right thumb. I don't remember screaming since my childhood, but on this day, I yelled in pain so loudly that my throat became parched and painful. All the nerves in my body burned in pain and my brain was going numb in processing the tumultuous emotions that I was feeling.

My tormentors conversed among themselves and brought in another metal case full of torture tools. As my panic rose, I shut my eyes as tightly as I could to stop the tears from spilling over my cheeks. I knew in a few hours, I would be dead, cut into hundreds of pieces, dying in agony and shame. The thought of death at this untimely moment made my skin cold.

I would be forgotten. Cynthia would never know what happened to me. I opened my eyes and looked at my bloodied fingers that had been skinned with scalpels. My blood was dripping steadily, soaking the granite floor. I wanted to live so that I could see Cynthia one last time, and hold her in my arms. It was during this terrible time that I found the will to remain alive by thinking about her charming smile and lovely face. Tears continued to pour down my face as I reminded myself about my love for Cynthia. She was such a glamorous angel like figure that I didn't think anyone in the world was nearly as perfect as my Cynthia. Cynthia was the most beautiful, loving and caring woman I had the fortune of getting to know, and her consistent selflessness was what endeared me to her. She never thought of herself, always looking for opportunities to give her life and wealth for people. Her generosity impressed me beyond restraints.

When I first met her, I was not wealthy, and did not have a place to stay. Her strict father would not allow me to enter her house, so we had to meet on the roads.

The first few years during which I got acquainted with Cynthia, we spent hours in the car, making love all day. It was the happiest moments of my life.

I was in awe when I saw how she sold her apartment to pay the medical bills of one of her friends. It was on this occasion that she had to move in with me because she had no other place to live. Cynthia was that kind of person who would happily relinquish her wealth to help another in need. She would take the coat off her back and donate it to the homeless person next to her. It was obvious that once someone got to know Cynthia, he could never stop loving her. I was no different. She was the epitome of beauty and perfection.

Cynthia was my family; she was my hope and the light in my heart. I told myself over and over again- I had to survive this torture so I could embrace her one more time. I could not become the victim of my destiny.

The interrogators proceeded with the second finger when a knock on the door distracted them. Two burly Camp guards were dragging the new recruit inside the torture chamber. He was struggling fiercely, and screaming that he was innocent. The guards spoke briefly to the interrogator. The man who had just pulled the fingernail from my thumb walked over and removed the metal chains around my wrists and told me that there was a mistake, and the colonel apologized for suspecting me of being the mole. I got up nervously from the gurney in which I was being tortured moments earlier and moved nervously, clutching my bruised mangled hand. My knees trembled and the moment I closed the steel doors behind me, I shuddered uncontrollably and dissolved in tears. I was choked by overwhelming emotions- the pain and fear that I had experienced, and the relief of being out of the torture chamber was too much for me to bear, but I struggled to maintain composure as security personnel walked past me in the corridor.

I was told that the Camp's cybersecurity center had just received a message stating that the recruit who had captured me was actually the mole and had been planting explosives in the facility. There were paper trails showing that he had purchased those devices. I was dumfounded. The truth was that I was the double agent, determined to destroy the Camp once and for all. I had no idea why they would believe the young recruit was the spy. Before I could protest or proclaim my guilt, I was being led away to the colonel's office. At the end of the corridor, just as the door closed, I heard the blood-curdling scream of the recruit. He was now being tortured as I had been

moments earlier. Fighting to hold back the fresh tears that filled my eyes, I gripped the handkerchief tightly around my fingers and vowed to tear down the cursed chambers of this Camp for eternity.

I was received warmly by the colonel who apologized profusely for suspecting me to be a mole. I was given yet another promotion and was sent back to the United States.

This time, the director of NSA personally welcomed me back. I was glad to be home, or at least that is what I thought his house was for me. His daughter Cynthia was one person I wanted to live for. I felt like I belonged.

One of the bitter tasks I had to perform during the training period was to locate and arrest enemies of the Soviet state. Our orders demanded that we fire at will at the enemy if they resisted arrest. One morning, I received one of those extraction orders. Within seconds after hearing the order, I started to cry uncontrollably. During his training, I was often ordered to shoot people who were supposedly the enemy. Initially, I captured them, and brought them back to the Camp headquarters with me, but I later learned the repercussion of my actions, and realized nothing could be more dangerous than to keep someone alive when ordered to kill them came through, because it meant condemning them to a far worse fate. Those nameless prisoners who were occasionally brought in to the Camp quarters were generally shipped off to the Colonel's private castle in East Berlin. I only heard rumors, but I knew the captives who were shipped to the socialist section of Germany never were seen again.

The majority of my time in this covert program was spent in the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, or better known to the Western world as East Germany. In these training centers, I was forced to become worse than a human being, especially because I had the talent to create and improvise complicated items and weapons at a fast pace. But my skills became a curse. I quickly learned how to disarm bombs, or rig explosives on unsuspecting surfaces. But it also meant I had to participate in dangerous and unpleasant missions for this clandestine group. To my horror, I had to take a human life in order to prevent them from a worse fate.

The Colonel had tasked me with another mission in Alūksne, a town in northeastern Latvia near the borders of Estonia and Russia. An industrial grade chemical factory was situated in that hilly region. The Colonel believed several organized criminal organizations were trying to create chemical weapons and use it to undermine his authority. I was ordered to retrieve samples from the main lab and destroy the facility. As per the regulations, I immediately notified my handler at KGB's *Devyatka* of the location of the attack. Since the Ninth Directorate provided security for Kremlin and other major government facilities around the Soviet Union, they promised to send in Soviet agents to the lab in order to remain one step ahead of the Colonel's plans and seize the chemicals from the criminals.

On the day of the operation, I accompanied a senior agent from the Camp. Our objective was to collect samples from the chemical laboratory and destroy the facility. My partner offered to set up demolition charges inside the main building while I remained inside and left an additional case for the KGB operatives who were scheduled to arrive. I used a syringe and extracted the solutions from the tubules and pocketed the samples before stopping by the power generator. My partner had attached meticulous detonating explosives on the electric wires which were designed to be remotely activated. I quickly removed the transmitting wire and destroyed the battery so when my partner attempts to detonate the charges, it would fail to explode.

I hurried back to the rendezvous place and found my partner waiting there. He was slightly flustered as to why I delayed so much in the factory. I muttered a vague excuse, but he wasn't listening. He removed a small device from his pocket and pressed the red button. Nothing happened.

He was perplexed and stared at me in confusion. "The detonator isn't working!"

"Maybe the charges weren't attached properly," I suggested, trying to look surprised.

My partner shook his head vigorously. "I could swear I did it perfectly," he insisted.

"Then I will go back in there and fix it," I offered helpfully, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me to the ground.

"No need. I have a secondary detonator in case the first one failed."

"What?" I could not believe my ears.

"I set another set of explosives on the perimeter," he explained, "and it should work just as efficiently to demolish the entire structure."

My heart constricted painfully and I wanted to cry out and entreat him not to press the button, but I could not do that without blowing my cover. I opened my mouth but no sound came out. My partner punched on the large button and I saw hell unfold before me. The chemical factory was crumbling before my eyes. And the clueless KGB agents were inside, about to face their doom.

I wanted to go back to the factory and rescue the five KGB operatives who were trapped in the inferno but my partner urged me to leave the vicinity at once. There was no way I could save them without arousing the team's suspicion.

I was fighting against destiny.

The colossal fire made the ground tremble as massive smoke clouds obscured our vision, making the move doubly risky. I glance back and saw firefighters struggling to douse the orange flames. No mortal could have survived that blast. My partner and I used our false identity papers to cross the border zone through the *zastavy* and returned to the Camp. The Colonel was pleased with our success and took the samples we had retrieved.

Two weeks after the mission, I was reporting to my KGB handler when I learned the extent of damage that took place in the chemical factory at Alŭksne. All five of the KGB officers had died instantly in the blast. Their remains were brought back to Moscow for a state funeral. Dazed, I raised my head, holding my sorrow and tears inside, trying to stay strong. The state memorial service was two days away. I made a mental note to attend the service and express my remorse in person to the brave men who laid their lives for the motherland.

I followed the funeral procession, slouching in the rear as women clutching their children close to their bodies, wept freely. The mothers and wives of the fallen KGB operatives were here. I stood silently, witnessing the casualty I had failed to prevent. The flag was carried by uniformed men as a Russian military composer began to sing. The notes were deep and painful.

I bowed my head to hide the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes. A light tap on my legs made me turn. A little girl wanted to give me her stuffed animal. I peered at the small face and recognized her. She was the daughter of one of the deceased Russian operatives who had perished in that terrible explosion. He was the liaison from KGB's Border Troops Directorate and had volunteered for the job. Now he was gone, incinerated in the fierce explosion that pulverized the chemical factory. I shook my head to clear the image of the burning factory.

"Ne grusti bol'she, pozhaluysta," the girl said, holding out the toy in her outstretched arm entreating me not to cry. Overwhelmed with emotion, I hurried out of sight, walking briskly, trying to create as much distance as possible between me and the funeral. Once I reached the main road, I collapsed on the ground and broke into violent sobs. It was so difficult to be a spy and a human.

I realized that I was nothing more than a scared boy hiding behind the mask of a spy. I shuddered in shame and disappointment. The little girl had no idea her father had died because of my mistake. I should have checked for a secondary detonator. I should have deactivated the bomb more efficiently. Five hardworking KGB operatives were dead because of me. Five beautiful families were broken, their widows helpless, their children orphan. I was so stricken with sadness that I seriously considered giving up the double life and quit the world of espionage altogether. But Richard refused to hear of it. He insisted that I was their only hope of bringing down the Colonel. I was a trusted senior agent in the Sector and was privy to the Camp's innermost secrets. If I didn't help the CIA and KGB shut down the Camp permanently, hundreds of good agents would continue dying. I had to persevere in my duty.

My work at the Soviet training Camp was considered top-priority and only those with highest level of security clearance were permitted to get briefed. We still had a bond of camaraderie among ourselves. A significant number of my comrades and peers suffered from incurable injuries or were gunned down by the enemy. We took great pains to bring back the comrade's body back to the Camp, and later, with the Colonel's permission, they were buried in the secret unmarked graves of the clandestine Camp, their bodies hidden below tall trees enclosed within the enclaves of the serene Siberian forests, but when the young recruit Ruslan died in action shortly after graduating from this training center, I was devastated for the loss but slightly pleased when this dear friend was laid to rest in St. Petersburg's Serafimovskoe Cemetery, where tens of thousands of victims of World War II had been buried. He had saved my life several times in the past and taught me how to use defensive techniques against a knife-fight. Ruslan came from a family of renowned wrestlers and whose uncle, who lived in a town just outside Chechnya's eastern border, had won the Olympic gold medal for superb performance. Although Ruslan lived in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, he came to the Camp each week to teach new recruits how to wrestle. I was grateful to him for imparting his knowledge and skill to me. His death caused me bitter grief and I missed his polite manners and disarming personality. I personally oversaw the burial procedure, and apart from the three men from a local burial detail there, no friends or relatives were present. A young priest also showed up briefly at the conclusion of the burial ceremony, and he spoke several phrases honorably, and mentioned how my friend had died a heroic death in battle with enemies of the state and sacrificed his life so that the children, women and the elderly of this great nation would no longer have to suffer from heartache on cower in their homes hearing the explosions of enemy bombs and planes. I looked on eagerly, hoping the religious man would say a few more words, but it was over. The handful of men who loitered around looked disinterested. I knew some of the attendees of this funeral and was even acquainted with several of them rather closely, so I knew their names. They also knew Ruslan and were doubtlessly grieving in their own way. However, the sting of grief that I was feeling knew no relief or respite. But I tried to remind myself that everyone had to leave this world one day, but I was still terribly sad. Good and honorable comrades were dying all around me, and I was but a helpless observer, hoping desperately that my turn would be next, so that I no longer had to suffer the indignation and disappointment of seeing another

beloved friend dying. I stood over Ruslan's grave, touching the soft earth that was freshly piled, damp from the early morning rain. Closing my eyes, I tried to shut out the reality of human life. My friend was alone, resting silently in the dark hole beneath my feet, surrounded by dead men who could not speak or see. What a terrifying prospect! The only comfort was to know he was in the company of other noble and fighting men and women. Suddenly, I fell to my knees and wept, feeling a vague sorrow for the servicemen and women who sacrificed their sacred lives to save the Motherland, and who died unselfishly so the future generation like me would continue to carry the Russian pride. I cried bitterly knowing that I too will end up alone and dead, lying forgotten on some dull alley or a pit in the forest. My friends may never even find out what had become of me. Despair was seizing my senses and I had the urge to leave the graveyard. The cemetery was a dreary place. Thousands of proud souls belonging to brave and honorable men lay beneath the cold and barren earth. The dead men and women, who were once happy youths, were now alone in their eternal journey, but I am certain that they too had dreamt of victory, but seeing the olden graves, I realized that now all their passions are buried in these tombs. But those were the lucky ones for they have left us these vestiges to look back to. Now, as a stateless person removed from loved ones and abandoned by peers, I felt more and more like a mouse running unceasingly on a pinwheel, with a dreary past, and nothing to look forward to, nothing to go back. But I tried to remind myself that I am a soldier, and like all soldiers, I knew that nothing belonged to me. Not life. Not love. Not happiness. I was alone in my distress, obscure in my torment and forgotten to all.

Since I Began to Suffer...

If this life had been surely mine's,
My every throw would have scored,
But I cannot even will - until God signs,
Decrees, as my King and as my Lord.

My sins had indeed belonged to me,
I can but plead for Thy clemency.
Because Thou, my Lord, knoweth best,
What I am and what I would be.

Then if Goodness should befall me,
Let me thank Thee now,
But if misery should come for me,
I must bear, but know not how.

The pain of yesteryear haunts me still;
I know not when their torment can cease,
I am but a subject of Thy will,
Building a scaffold with anvils of peace.

Yet, still shall I pray to Thee,
To change those sufferings into Joy,
Whatever may the future be,
Thou art there to see my ploy.

My harrowing days above this land,
That is wrought in wear and tear,
It is but pressed beneath Thy hand,
Where Thou created pain and fear.

God, if only I could truly gaze,
Upon Thy phantom face,

But my wretched self, Thou can see,
So, bless me in Thy grace.

And if death be the only bar,
Between Thy celestial glory and me,
Then let that day not linger far,
And grant me soon immortality.

Pardon the lack of Wisdom here,
Which from youthful years did spurn,
Forgive my longings to be near,
The One for Whom my life was sworn.

The branches of my life would soon be,
Withering as the autumn tree,
One by one, the miseries will flee,
These garrisons of agony.

It took another six months for the Camp to become completely annihilated. I was able to recruit and turn one of the colonel's hackers and brought him along with me. We discovered that the Camp had satellite cells in thirty cities around the world and one by one, we dismantled the whole, cutting off the monster's arm, one at a time, until finally, the base in Russia was raided by US and Russian forces stationed in Moscow. Unfortunate, the only person who we couldn't capture was the colonel, the mastermind of all the mercenary cell. In the chaos of the raid, he had managed to flee.

I didn't let that trouble me. The NSA director kept his end of the bargain and I was finally free. My joy had no bounds when I saw that the criminal organization that had abducted me from prison was gone. The Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time. Months later, the KGB officially ceased to exist and was replaced by the Federal Counterintelligence Service.

The new director of FSK, or the *Federalnaya Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki* expressed great pleasure at my service and offered me to work for the Russian government, but I wanted to leave the double life and start afresh. Back in the United States, I received new identity papers and was allowed to travel to any part of the world. I thought this was the right time to ask Cynthia to move out from her father's house and live with me in my apartment.

Cynthia was ecstatic and was eager to move in with me. She asked, however, to seek her father's blessings. He was very close to her and would miss her dearly if she left him. I could see that the pair was very close. This made me happier. I would have loved to have him as a family, a man who had offered me another chance at life when I was a vagrant sleeper agent from the Soviet Union.

We waited for the NSA director to return to the farmhouse and discuss his daughter's future. Over dinner, Cynthia and I told her father that we have considered to an apartment in New York City. My words seemed to have elicited an odd reaction from him. He looked stupefied. After what seemed forever, he asked Cynthia how long we were seeing each other. All this time, he had no clue that I was getting close to his daughter. The director of NSA was genuinely surprised, but from the tone he used with me, it sounded as though he was very displeased with me. I am not certain what made him so angry, but I guess it was not a welcoming thought for him to have his daughter date or marry a man who was involved in dangerous espionage.

Cynthia's father quizzed me about my future plans and works, and finally said if I carried out a handful of missions for him and help him out with his work load and several CIA cases, then he would be able to ensure that his daughter will be safe with me. My stint in the intelligence agency would be officially over and Cynthia and I could start anew.

The next week, I received the full details of my assignment. A chemical factory in Russia was being used as a hub for illegal uranium enrichment and a Balkan terrorist group that seized a shipment of arms from the U.S. Navy was using the factory to store their stolen weapons. My mission was to retrieve the stolen goods and return it directly to the NSA's director. This operation was unsanctioned by the CIA. Due to America's sensitive relationship with the Russian government, the US government was hesitant to send in an American operative to complete this mission.

I was a little apprehensive about the assignment myself, because it worried me to find myself in Russia again; a place I had fought so hard to leave. I was afraid that my past would catch up with me. The Camp may have been decimated but the colonel was still at large

and by now, he must know that I was the double agent who had destroyed his life's work. But Cynthia was to be my fiancée soon and I did not want to disappoint her father. Perhaps, if he saw how much I loved her and how devoted I was to him as my future father-in-law, he would be pleased to see his daughter with me. With hopeful thoughts about the future, I set out to do the final mission for him.

I set the coordinates of the chemical factory and located the place within a few hours after landing in Russia. Using the skills I learned in the Camp as a blitz commando, I scanned the area and entered the factory. It was largely empty. There was no one inside. I set out to search every corner of the compound, hoping to swiftly locate the stolen merchandize and return it to Cynthia's father. It would help me come into his good graces. I looked in vain for any uranium enrichment material but there was nothing in there. My only thought was that somehow the NSA director had inadvertently given me mistaken coordinates. Or he was given faulty intel by his sources.

Realizing that I had spent too much time in a restricted Russian military zone and that this location was useless, I hastened to proceed with my pre-planned exit strategy. I retreated to the rear of the chemical factory and headed to the escape car but the vehicle that I had parked earlier behind the building was gone. I was confused but not wanting to loiter in a restricted space and risk getting arrested, I set out on foot. It was a cold night and I barely made it to a highway before blinding lights of police car surrounded me. What happened after that was blurry. I was bundled into a police van and whisked to a drab station where my finger prints were taken. Within hours, several plainclothes men arrived and gave me a shot of a clear liquid. I passed into unconsciousness. When I awoke, I was in a stone room, almost like the interior of an ancient cave. My guess was that I was taken into one of the secret prison sites below the Ural Mountains.

I did not have long to contemplate on my location. When the guard saw that I gained consciousness, he summoned his boss; a heavy-set man wearing a doctor's uniform. I asked him if he was the prison doctor, to which he laughed and said he was known in this prison as the bone doctor. That day, I faced my first session with the fearful man. It was the most brutal interrogation I had faced up till this day. The questions he kept asking were identical. Who I worked for and what I was doing in the chemical factory? When I was a recruit at the Camp, I had been trained to withstand torture and supply false information to interrogators. However, my sessions with the bone doctor was becoming more and more dreadful. The excruciating pain I was forced to undergo was intolerable but anger and adrenaline kept me sane. But not for long. My mind melted away to despair and I began to weep frantically every time the metal door clanged open, announcing to my bruised body that the torturer had returned.

By the third day, he had surgically scaled and chipped away several centimeters of bone from my arms and legs. This was done with a host of chisels and scalpels without any sort of anesthesia. My incessant tears had left traces of their passage on my pale face but there was no reprieve from the pain and mutilation. The interrogator vowed to carry on his experiments on my body's bone until I became very brittle. The bone doctor told me how the longest duration a prison was able to endure this torture was ten days. I racked my brains to remember how long I was in the cave-like prison. It was my sixth day. And I was getting very afraid. For hours, my feverish eyes would hypnotically gaze at the metal door that separated me from the torturers, willing it to open and set me free.

There would be no outside help for me.

No one knew I was here.

I neglected to mention my trip to Cynthia. She would wonder why I wasn't returning home. My employer, the director of NSA was the only person in the world who was aware that I had gone to Russia, but even he would not know where I had been taken to or who had captured me. I only wished there would be a tiny hope or opportunity to escape. I dreamed of slipping away through the cracks on the wall or between the bars of the jail. I waited for nobody. Help was not coming.

The seventh session with the bone doctor began earlier that day. I was dragged from my cell; at this point, I had become so weak that I could not walk without assistance. I was suffering from exhaustion and starvation. The guards had to carry my limp body to the torture chamber and hang me from my arms over a metal pole. The bone doctor was not in the room yet. A few minutes later, the metal gate rattled. The inquisition was here. As the guards turned around to unlock the gate and let the torturer in, I felt the entire ceiling tremble. Then I felt the ground under my feet vibrate. I recognized the sound. It was from a homemade explosive.

Someone had set a bomb overhead. The ceiling was crumbling over my head and caused the chains on my arms to disintegrate. My hands were free!

I balanced myself and made my way towards the only exit in the room. The guards had fled, fearing the stone ceiling might collapse. I ran blindly in the rubble filled passage way and found a portion of the roof caved in. Debris was still falling heavily to the base. I heard the rotor of a helicopter whirring. It was a rescue! The roof was too high so I waited for the rescue chopper to drop a thick rope. My freedom was near. When the rope descended, I held on to it with all my heart. Several gloved hands yanked me into the chopper and secured me to one of the seats. I could feel someone taking my vitals and fixing intravenous needle to my arms. Half dazed

from the exhaustion, I sank into an intermittent slumber. From the rear of the helicopter, I heard whispers. “*Russland ist ein gefährliches Land.*” My basic knowledge of *Deutsche* told me that my rescuers were most likely German.

I was saved.

Upon my return to the United States, I learned of what had transpired. My hacker friend, Dustin, who had abandoned the Camp along with me after learning all about the colonel’s illegal activities was worried when he heard that I had disappeared. Dustin hacked into the global satellites and traced my location to this remote region of Russia. It took him another week to recruit a team of former German special forces to rescue me. They had to identify my precise location and surgically execute the prison break in record time. However, I was more concerned about the leak of information. How did the men who capture me know where to find me? Who had informed them that I was going to conduct a stealth raid in a remote Russian chemical factory? The answers to these questions were unknown even to Dustin.

I decided to forfeit these unpleasant thoughts and went to meet Cynthia. She was genuinely surprised to see me. She thought I had left her permanently. I was shocked to hear that and I assured her I was resolved to spend every moment of my life with her. Cynthia later admitted that when she expressed her concerns about my absence for a whole week, her father suggested to her that I might have abandoned her due to being overwhelmed by the idea of committing to a full-time relationship.

I was a bit disheartened to hear that. I had no idea prior to this that the NSA director disapproved of me as a suitor for his daughter. However, if he only realized how much I loved Cynthia, how desperately I wanted to make his daughter happy and be at her side forever, maybe then he would soften his stance towards me. I finally met him for the debriefing. He seemed genuinely shocked to hear about my ordeal. He too had no idea how the rogue Russian spy agencies learned about my arrival and promised to conduct an internal investigation in order to unearth the leak. I was satisfied and persuaded Cynthia to move in with me. The grueling pain I had to endure in the Soviet secret jail still haunted me but I was content to be with the woman I loved.

Several months later, the director of NSA contacted me again. He apologized profusely before asking for another favor. I had to do one last mission for him; this time it was in China. I had to infiltrate a security firm in central China and find out what they knew American missile launcher system. He promised me it would be a clean affair. I would be in and out within five days. Because of the past fiasco that took place in Russia, he assigned another CIA officer to accompany me in this trip. Should anything untoward happen, I would have a backup plan.

I begrudgingly agreed. It was a risky operation but I hoped to carry out his wishes for Cynthia’s sake. This time, I told her where I was going and why her father wanted me to go to China. I also told her if I didn’t return in one week, to alert the federal government or the American consulate in Russia. It was a tearful farewell.

I flew to Beijing with my new partner, Jack. He was a nine-teen year veteran of the United States Air Force and was tasked with flying us into the country. Jack maneuvered expertly over China’s restricted airspace and instructed me to parachute out of the aircraft over the target area while he proceeded to a safe landing space. He said he would ping my location and join me within couple of hours. I grabbed my parachute and leapt from the small airplane. The night was freezing and I could feel the clouds enveloping me, suffocating my lungs. I pulled the oxygen mask over my head and inhaled but there was no air in it. With horror, I realized that the mask was faulty.

My oxygen tank was empty! I was so certain it was perfectly functional when I refilled it before boarding the plane. There must have been a leak in the tank that caused all the air to escape. I gasped for breath and prolonged the free fall as long as I could so that I could reach the ground quickly. With less than a mile remaining for impact to the ground, I pulled the parachute string, slowing my descent. The patch of grassy land I landed on was damp with the previous day’s rain. I gathered my gears and hiked to the target area. The security complex I was instructed to infiltrate was an underground building, running eleven stories deep into earth. Only one floor was over the ground level. The cuboid structure had no window. The walls were painted black. It was so ominously dark that it gleamed even in the moonless night.

I edged my way closer. There were no obvious security barriers in place. Should I wait for Jack or not? The question raced several times through my head until I decided to proceed. It would be easier to infiltrate the building under the cover of the night. Jack may not even know my precise location. He may be compromised. I set a timer for thirty minutes and waited. If he wasn’t nearby within this time, I would assume the worst and head into the Chinese security facility.

The main gates were unlocked. I raced noiselessly across the front courtyard and paused by the door of the structures. To ensure there was no hostile personnel inside, I tossed one of my gas grenades through the doors and charged in. The lobby was empty. I moved to the elevator and pressed the bottom arrow. A pair of glass doors opened, exposing a circular space. The elevator was state-of-the-art. I entered the elevator and pressed the lowest sublevel digit that was available. The glass doors slid silently and motor seemed to whirl overhead. I suddenly felt very dizzy. My eyes closed and I crumpled to the ground.

I awoke finding myself strapped to a metal chair. Every fiber of my clothes was cut off from my body. I was cold. I was terrified of the unknown. Nothing good could be expected to happen here. Several Chinese men were surrounding me. They stared at me with blank eyes and expressionless faces. I begged them to let me go. One of the older men approached me and demanded to know which agency I worked for. I said I knew nothing and that I was only a tourist. He didn't believe me of course and he motioned the other two men to hold me firmly while he extracted a pair of pliers from his drawer. He grabbed my face and reached into my mouth. I tried to scream and struggle but it was useless. With one expert move, the bespectacled man gripped my molar tooth and extracted it neatly from my jaw.

I sometimes like to think I know what pain feels like, but I could never imagine how petrifying the feeling was to have a tooth pulled out without any anesthesia. The nerves in my body screamed in pain and I could feel the tip of my toes burning from the stabbing sensations. He demanded to know the answers to the same questions and gave me a small dose of morphine to numb my pain. When it started to wear off, I was again asked the same questions with promises of a larger dose of medication if I cooperated. This trend went on for the entire day, in which I lost four of my molar teeth. I fainted several times and couldn't form a coherent sentence. The men left me after that.

When I regained consciousness, I was alone. In the dim room, my eyes scanned the surrounding area. Something glinted near my chair. The man who had been using the plier to extract my teeth had left the tool lying on the floor. It took my entire will power to double over and drop the chair to its side. Then I managed to clutch the metal tool with my bound hands and use it to break the straps around my body. It took five long minutes to break free. I knew the building was protected like a fort and escaping through the front door would be foolish so I waited for my torturers to return. Pretending to be bound and unconscious, I waited until the main tormentor came near. When he attempted to inspect my pulse, I snaked my arm around his waist and seized his weapon. It was loaded. I emptied the rounds first into the three guards that were standing behind him before hitting him on the head with the butt of the revolver.

He passed out cold.

I took one of the men's uniforms and dressed in those overalls before stealthily moving out of the room. There were scores of employees walking casually about the corridors but no one suspected me. I was able to safely leave the security compound and arrive at my rendezvous spot. My body was severely bruised and I could barely balance myself on my feet.

The rendezvous area was eerily silent. The thick fog danced like ghosts as the damp wind thrashed restlessly around the long grasses. There was no help in sight. I lost the energy to remain standing and collapsed to the ground.

As I lay down in agony, feeling raw pain surge through my veins, I wondered what would've happened if I had a chance at a normal life, away from the savage torture and mutilation that dominated my daily life.

What would life be like if I didn't have to fly to remote corners of the world every week and break into secret facilities and steal state secrets or spy on unsuspecting scientists or arms dealers? Would I have been in much more serenity and outward peace?

I wish I had a loving wife; I wish I had my friend with me, still alive.

I wish I had a son whom I could give all the love that my father never gave me.

I wish I could save my mother and keep her with me in the most beautiful house and garden till she grew old.

I wish I had one day of peace or love in my life.

But I didn't.

Fear ruled every thought and motion of my diabolical life. I was wary of making acquaintances lest they be harmed on my account and I was doubly afraid for those who had any feelings for me because I knew they would suffer. That is the reason I spent most of my life as a loner. I tried not to make any friends, particularly after the ones I had were all brutally taken away. I lost all my old friends to either torture and death. Those who lived were manipulated to the point of no return. They were lied to, and were taught to hate me and consider me to be the enemy. The miseries in my life made me wish I could sink to a hole and drown away to a utopian world, where no one would get hurt on my account and no enemy could overpower me.

As was agreed prior the flight, Jack would be in this spot if I had gone radio silent for more than an hour. I scanned the area. He should have been here.

When it seemed long enough a wait, I decided to find an alternative route to the United States. I contacted Dustin, my old contact from the Camp. The hacker traced my location and directed me to a safe house where I received new travelling papers and identity. Once again, I returned to the United States alone and inside of a cargo plane.

Upon my arrival, Cynthia's father was waiting to greet me at the tarmac. I complained to him about the series of faulty intel he had supplied me with and he assured me that the main culprit was Jack, who had somehow received a bribe from the Chinese triad and agreed to sell out the plan. His version sounded genuine. I immediately set out to track down the Air Force pilot who had betrayed me. It took me three months of constants searching to locate his whereabouts. Jack was living in a remote Scottish island under a pseudonym.

When I showed up at his doorstep to confront him of his crimes, he feigned surprise. I told him the NSA director had told me about how he had sold me out to the Chinese. Jack somehow found the whole affair very amusing and retorted that he was only following orders. He insisted that Cynthia's father had ordered him to abandon me in the Chinese village. I wasn't supposed to return alive according to the plan because the Chinese agents were supposed to have executed me.

When I recalled the terrible pain the Chinese torturers put me through, I felt anger boil inside me. I was prepared to kill Jack for what I believed he had done to me, but his story ringed true. What if he *was* telling the truth? It seemed impossible that Cynthia's father would want me to be captured, tortured and killed by the Chinese. I went back to Cynthia and held a sincere conversation with her. I told her all about what Jack had told me. She became very angry with me for accusing her father of being a traitor. Cynthia didn't believe her father was capable of hurting a fly and she stormed away that day and went to confront her father. The NSA's director was tearful and told his daughter that he was innocent and was being framed. He also warned her to be careful around me because I too may be compromised or might have become a spy for a foreign agency. Cynthia arrived in my apartment, with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She looked very sophisticated with a red pencil skirt and pink blouse. Without wasting a moment, she warned me never to speak ill of her father again. He was innocent, she was certain of that beyond doubt.

**Я плакать не буду,
Грех жаловаться мне;
Я точно не найду
Того, что потерял в себе.
От мира уж скоро
Останутся руины.
Все жду я метеора
Сгорели чтоб вражины.**

**Ох, если б мука эта
Покинула планету,
И никому на свете
Боль моя не светила,
И этой смерти груз
Ничьих не рвало б уз.**

December, 13

The year was nearing to an end and Christmas festivities lingered in every corner of the city streets. Cynthia had softened her stance on my investigation in the Chinese mission and invited me to her family ranch for the holidays. I was elated. Perhaps her father had forgiven me for blaming him for the failed mission in China. When I arrived at her home, I was received warmly by Cynthia's aging father. He was no longer the director of NSA. The President had promoted him to be the director of National Intelligence. The DNI was arguably the highest position attainable in the intelligence community. I was proud and happy for him and Cynthia was overjoyed at her father's success. We enjoyed an early Christmas party and were busy putting up holiday lights around the ornately decorated house. When it was time for retiring, Cynthia's father was irked visibly. He warned us that we must abide by his house rules which stipulated that no unwed couple could share a room. I was devastated but Cynthia insisted we respect her father's wish. I grudgingly took a room adjoining to her and spend the restless night thinking about my fiancée.

I awoke early the next morning and wandered about the spacious house. It was tastefully decorated. I found myself wandering into the attics and basement, studying Cynthia's family portraits the adorned the walls of the carpeted hall ways. There was dazzling pictures

of Cynthia with her father. The family seemed cozy. I was puzzled however by the absence of her mother. Cynthia never spoke about her mother and not one picture of the woman was present in the house. I spend many hours in the attic, searching through old and dusty photographs, and finally came across a black and white image of a beautiful brunette.

A note at the bottom dated the picture around the time of Cynthia's birth.

It was signed: Ekaterina.

The stark resemblance of the face with Cynthia left no doubt that this was her mother. My mind pulsed with excitement and I hurriedly pocketed the old picture hoping Cynthia would be able to tell me more about her mother's life.

I brought up the subject of her mother after dinner that day and showed Cynthia the picture I found in the basement. To my surprise, Cynthia was not overtly excited to hear about her mother. She mumbled that she doesn't care anymore. When I pressed her about it, she explained what had happened.

According to her father, after Cynthia's birth, her mother Ekaterina who was originally from Russia, abandoned her and fled the country. She was wanted in the United States for multiple espionage cases. Cynthia's father had to raise her by himself for several years. When she turned six years of age, Ekaterina returned and demanded to be part of the family again. She would burst into fits of anger and scream at her husband. One day, she threw several heavy objects at Cynthia's father, who had been a junior officer at the CIA at that time. He immediately summoned the police and after a lengthy trial, he convinced the jury to release his wife. By this time, Ekaterina lost interest in her daughter and left for the Soviet Union yet again. Cynthia never saw her mother again.

"After that day, she was dead to me. I never spoke of my mother again." Cynthia told me tearfully. "She hurt my father. My mother was never there for me."

I tried to process all of the information. "Look, Cynthia," I reasoned. "Maybe there was a reason for what she did. What if her safety was compromised and she fled to protect you and your father from the danger she was in?"

"I don't care what she was facing," Cynthia said heatedly. "What kind of mother thinks she has the right to abandon her child?"

I tried to pacify her and dropped the subject.

But curiosity sporadically crept up in my mind.

I wanted to find out what really happened to Ekaterina. I loved Cynthia and wanted to know her family like my own.

Family was something I didn't have. I never had a compassionate father or a loving mother. I didn't know what it was like to have siblings, to share toys and joys.

Before I met Cynthia, the only thing closest to family to me was the Russian woman who I saw crossing a busy street in Manhattan. It was only months after the Camp sent me to the United States to become a Soviet sleeper agent. I was alone in a large city and the woman's familiar face reminded me of the mother I once had. The woman was around thirty years of age, perhaps a few years younger than what my mother would have been, had she lived. For me, it was as though a part of home had returned.

I was a 19-year-old Russian boy who was forced to become a rogue agent for a spy agency that used unconventional means to coerce world leaders to do their bidding. I knew I was a pawn, left to be discarded without any warning.

Living, for me, did not have much meaning. I had no family or friends. I was unloved, unwanted. I was lonely and sad with the meaningless cycle I had to blend in. America was different from Russia in that multitudes of people from foreign nations filled the streets. It was comforting to see that I was not the only outsider in the vast North American continent.

November, 1971

I had only vague recollection of the memories of my mother. I was ten years old when she died, but the events preceding her death haunts me even now. Our family lived adjacent to one of the narrow roads in Tottenham. It was where my stepfather had settled with my mother before I was born.

I discovered much later under which circumstance they had arrived in this country as immigrants. When my mother was sixteen, she aspired to be a fashion model and expressed her ardent desire to her parents. Her family, living in the close-knit community of the Northern Caucasus, wanted to have nothing to do with such wild ideas and rebuked her severely. Although her mother or my maternal grandmother, who was a native of Ryazan, supported her in her endeavors, my grandfather wholeheartedly disapproved. When I had become much older, I interviewed a number of my mother's relatives and found out that her mother was a working in Moscow when she met her husband, a charming man from Grozny. They soon married and moved to the North Caucasus where they lived in marital bliss and gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Locals nicknamed my mother the diamond of Grozny. From whatever I can recall of my mother, I know the people of Grozny were not exaggerating.

Stubborn as she was, my mother contacted a modeling agency and ran away to Moscow to be with her mother's family and pursue her dreams. She had barely begun her career when her striking looks arrested the attention of local criminals who in tried to smuggle her into a human trafficking ring, to sell her to a high-profile pimp who catered to Moscow's elites. However, my mother was lucky and she was able to escape and continued to shine in her dancing career. Shortly thereafter, her beauty and charms attracted the attention of a powerful Soviet politician who used to visit the theater regularly to watch her perform. The powerful leader was older than her by several decades but he offered her many rewards and favors in order to marry her.

The man who married my mother was a Soviet statesman and Politburo member, who had been promiscuous since his youth and never got married. He came from a wealthy farming family and never married and officially had no children of his own. Nevertheless, he was besotted with the beautiful young model and persuaded her to marry him unofficially and live as his mistress. My mother tried to flee at first but later, reluctantly agreed to become his wife, even though on paper, the Soviet leader would remain a bachelor for the rest of his life. His romantic partner was a woman who was a member of the Soviet Communist Party,, but their union was never recorded in the official registry and for the remainder of his live, he and the other woman were unregistered partners. According to some reports, he and the communist party woman had three children together.

Months after my mother married him in a private ceremony, she fell ill and physicians confirmed that she was pregnant. The Soviet party leader was still adamant about refusing to register the marriage, and my mother became more and more worried about the scandal a pregnancy would create. No one among her family or friends knew she was married, and soon after her child was born, she demanded an ultimatum from her husband. She wanted the marriage to be officially registered or she would divorce him. The Politburo member refused to make his marriage to my mother official, so he reluctantly signed the divorce papers. One of his bodyguards was sympathetic to my mother's plight. He confronted my mother and offered to marry her after the divorce was finalized, and claim paternity for the newborn child so that his employer, who was powerful, would not have to claim the baby as his own. My mother agreed to marry him but the guard knew remaining in Russia would not be safe for the mother or child so he quickly arranged for passports and travel documents for the two of them and headed to North London, England. Five months later, I arrived in London and was registered as a healthy six-months-old baby at a hospital in South Tottenham.

As a child, I had no doubt that the man I knew as my father was my real biological father. My mother never told me otherwise although I wondered occasionally why I looked so different from the towering man who constantly glowered at me. My only memories from childhood consists of screams and bellows. My father used to beat me for every small folly. At the age of five, he hit me so hard that my arm broke. In the hospital, doctors wanted to know what had happened. My father appeared out of nowhere and whispered in my ear. He said if I told them he broke my arm, then he would break my leg next time. My crime for receiving this punishment had been to play noisily after it got dark. I became so terrified of playing indoors, lest my father should be angry, that I began to play outdoors more often.

One of my childhood playmates was Oleg, a chubby boy with brown eyes. He shared his ball with me. We often played together for hours until his parents called him inside. Oleg would ask me to go to his house. His parents were gentle people. They treated me like their own son and even let me eat dinner with them. I never realized how hungry I was or how much I was capable of eating before I went to Oleg's house. My father never allowed me to eat to my fill. Half the week, he would not allow my mother to give me food for various crimes that I had committed. If he shouted at mother, I used to yell at him. In response, he would hit my head with cooking pots and swear to starve me for the whole week.

I remember a particular incident that happened on my father's birthday. My mother had prepared a meal for us and later served us pizza. I saw my father devouring the pieces until his eyes narrowed on a slice in his hand. He glared for a moment and then tossed the slice at my mother and screamed. I can never forget the terrible look on his face when he yelled at my mother and hit her on the head with the plate. He was asking her repeatedly why the pizza slice was so thick. Every time he asked the question, he became more violent. I tried to shield my mother from his blows but he tossed me to one side and continued to hurt her. I felt so helpless in this world.

When I turned nine years old, a cheerful family moved in a two story brickhouse on the street across our house. The couple had four teenage children. The youngest son was around my age and we bonded instantly. I found out his name was Charles. We shared bike rides along the hilly road and every evening, Charles took me to his house. His parents were the most polite people I've ever met. They would shower me with praises and attention. When summer ended, it was time to resume school. To my utter delight, Charles and I ended up attending the same school and were in the same class.

It was a blessing for me. I would wait eagerly after school, and stand with Charles in front of the playground. When his mother came to pick him up, she would take both of us to their house and I would be offered refreshments and warm meals. I could eat to my fill- something my father never permitted me to do. I felt cherished and loved in that house and wondered why I was not born into that lovely home. Charles' family had numerous weekend traditions such as going to football games on weekends. On several occasions, they

invited me along. How wonderful were those happy moments of bliss! I secretly dreamed that his family could adopt me so I could be away from my harsh overbearing father forever.

Charles' mother would prepare heavy meals and dinner for me and her other children. I never realized a family could be so happy and peaceful. I made it a habit to go to Charles' house every day. His mother would always feed me and even let me borrow Charles' clothes. One evening, I was relishing the fresh meal, when I heard Charles arguing with his parents. They were trying to convince him to take me back to my house. His mother said it was not right that a boy from another family should have dinner with them every day. They thought my parents would miss me and my father might even be angry with me for not going home on time. I was just nine years old but I felt embarrassed and ashamed of myself. I didn't want the nice family to feel obliged to host me but I also didn't know where else to go. My home was too frightening and dark. There was only terror and beating there.

One day, I returned home a little late than usual. My father was lying drunk in the middle of the living room and my mother was weeping softly in the corner. I saw bruises in her face and body and I realized he was beating her. I tried to comfort her but my father sluggishly got to his feet and attempted to strike me with his fist. I ran to the back room and hid under the counter.

The next morning, my father stipulated my punishment for coming home late. He said I would be grounded at home and not be granted any food for the rest of the day. At night time, I crept into the kitchen and looked for food everywhere. All the shelves were locked. The pantry was sealed. I sat on the kitchen floor and cried until my hunger abated. I was almost ten years old and would get very hungry. I don't know if it was the sound of my tears that woke my mother from her sleep but I could hear her light footsteps entering the kitchen. She saw me and hurriedly began to prepare a sort of bread and cheese for me to eat. After an hour, my meal was prepared. My mother filled a plate with warm bread and cheese and told me to finish it quickly.

As soon as I began to eat, I heard heavy steps shuffling in to kitchen. The noise in the kitchen had woken him up. When he saw I was eating, he leapt up in rage and grabbed the plate from me and threw it at my mother. He screamed at her, and warned her that he had forbidden me to eat; NO one in the house was allowed to feed me. My mother cried and said I was only a young child who didn't deserve to be punished, that I was a growing boy who needed to eat. Her pleas seemed to enrage him further and he grabbed her hair and used the back of his hand to repeatedly strike my mother. I never felt more helpless in my entire life. I was barely four feet tall, and came up to my father's waist. There was nothing I could do to stop him from hurting my mother. I felt that it was all my fault. She was being punished for trying to give me food.

As my mother screamed in pain and pleaded for my father to stop, I noticed the hunting rifle hanging from the window pane of the kitchen. It was so near, within my reach. Without thinking, I pulled it down and aimed it at his direction. I shouted out loud and told him to stop. There must have been some seriousness in my tone, because he stopped momentarily and turned around. I told him if he didn't stop hitting my mother, I would shoot. He laughed at my remarks and tried to grab me but I backed away. He was faster and wrestled the weapon from my small hands. I watched in horror as he aimed the gun directly at my face. I was trying to use all my strength to lift the dining chair in front of me but it was too heavy. My father was wobbling unsteadily, trying to squeeze the trigger. I closed my eyes to shut out the terror. The gun went off with a deafening roar, but not before I heard my mother scream. I opened my eyes and stared with horror at the scene before me. My mother had jumped in front of my father in an attempt to save my life and the bullet that was intended for me hit her in the chest instead. I saw my father drop the heavy gun and look frightened. I ran and crouched next to my mother. She stared at me with teary eyes, trying to smooth my hair. I don't think she saw anything at all. I called her over and over again.

There was no answer.

Meanwhile, a lot of commotion was surrounding me. Neighbors heard the gun shot and had stormed into the house. They saw me lying over my mother's lifeless body and carried me away from her. An ambulance arrived and several paramedics raced to take her to the hospital. The police were there as well. They saw the gun lying in the kitchen and assumed that my father had shot my mother. I saw them take him away in handcuffs. No one asked me what had happened. One elderly neighbor took me to his house and told me the state will look after me now. I was instructed to go to my house and take everything that belonged to me. Hours later, Charles and his parents came to my house. They said they had heard of what happened and wanted to take me to the hospital to see my mother. Apparently, she was still alive, but in critical condition. Doctors did surgery and removed the bullet but they didn't think she would survive.

I followed Charles' father and went to the hospital. Despite the tubes covering her face, I recognized my mother instantly from behind the glass windows. She appeared to be deep asleep. I went nearer and stood beside her bedside. The nurses saw me and quietly went away. I stared at my mother's pale face. There were bruises under her eyes but she looked peaceful. I sat by the hospital bed and waited for her to wake up. But the deathly still room was unchanging. The only sound I heard over and over was beeping of monitors that were attached to her body. The incessant alarms were jolting me into a state of alertness as I strained to find the smallest sign of life. She was motionless. I spoke to her for hours, told her I was sorry for not being able to save her. I told her that Charles was my good

friend whose parents brought me to the hospital. Every time I spoke, I willed her to reply to me, but the only sound that reverberated in the small hospital room was the beeping of the ventilator.

The noise haunts me still, as though my ears are still ringing with the ominous beeps that were echoing in the room in which I last saw my mother. Although I witnessed the tragic event decades earlier, I felt as if it happened yesterday. I had become psychologically affected to the extent that during a mission or a vital stealth operation that required utmost diligence, I would shudder in fear at the slightest mechanical noise. The images of my mother's face and hospital bed would flood into my head. I would find myself going back in time and reliving the moments I spent in her company. The beeps haunted me forever. And I dreaded nothing more than the noise of the wretched alarm that handicapped my mother and snatched her loving soul away from me.

At nightfall, doctors came to the intensive care unit and escorted me out of the room. I didn't want to leave my mother but the nurses grabbed my arm and tried to lead me away. I clung to the steel rails of the hospital bed, studying my mother's face for the slightest sign of life. She was still asleep. I didn't mind. She could rest now. Tomorrow, when she awoke, I would tell her everything that happened. I returned to my small house, that was now devoid of any occupants, and went to my mother's bedroom. Her clothes were strewn all over the place. I gathered the familiar fabrics and clasped it tightly before organizing all the items neatly in her drawer. I found a large box in the bottom drawer. It was heavy. I pulled it out and saw that it was a leather-bound book. I knew how to read and I noticed the familiar scrawling to be my mother's handwriting. It was her diary! I carefully carried the leather book with me and stored it in my bag. There were only a few other items that belonged to me in this house. I packed in no time. It was time to leave forever.

A court in London sentenced my father to life in prison. Since I had no living family members in England, it was decreed that I would be sent to a state sponsored residential orphanage somewhere in east London.

When it was time for me to be shipped off to an obscure orphanage, it was early 1975. A middle-aged woman who I had never seen before showed up and claimed to be my aunt. She said he was from Moscow and knew my extended family members in Russia. I pressed her for information but all she would say that my father was her brother. I soon realized that the woman was rather influential because within weeks, she was able to remove me from the State children's house and fly me to the Soviet Union.

It was the first time I set foot on the dry chilled land. My first stop was in Moscow where I was introduced to a large family, most of whom I have never heard of. Their names were redundant and sounded strange. I spoke a little Russian but it was nowhere near their frequency level. Among the many people who claimed to be related to me and my father, one man who looked quite elderly treated me harshly. The woman who I believed to be my aunt was rather kind and caring and looked after me well but the happiness I felt to be reunited with estranged family members soon faded away when the elderly man began to frequent the abode I was housed in. He told my aunt I was a bastard, and was not his grandson. He yelled at the hapless women and berated them until they were reduced to tears. I was shocked. How could he say I was not his grandson? His son was my father. My mother and I lived in England with him all our lives. But the relentless old man ordered his daughters to expel me from the house since I was not related to them by blood. He also escorted me to the state registry office to have my surname changed. My last name could not be associated to his family, he insisted.

I was doubly confused. How was it possible that I was not their relative? Was not my father their very own brother? But the woman who had been generous to me until that point spoke to me apologetically one morning. She said her father was right. I was not the son of her brother. I was not her nephew. My father was someone else- someone very powerful but who had a wife of his own at the time my mother conceived me. The man I had known to be my father had married my mother out of compassion, in order to save her life. My aunt insisted she would have loved to take charge of my upbringing and provide financial assistance but could no longer do so.

In my young mind, none of the narratives were making sense, but I pretended to understand. I personally was not too enthusiastic to be among such strangers. I felt cold shoulder and neglect everywhere. The extended family I almost believed to be my own decided that it was enough and they would have nothing more to do with a naughty young boy like me. The old man drove me out of their family house and sent me off to a private children's house.

My life as a ward of the state was not too significantly different from my parent's home. I was not beaten here but rarely socialized with the children who were in there with me. However, within weeks after arriving there, I succumbed to diarrhea and chronic fever. The change in atmosphere was appalling, but not nearly as dreadful as the food.

At War with Sorrow

What sorrows are stored in the tears I weep?
What measures have the pain that I feel?
Despair have seized me in my sleep,
Like desert falcons with claws of steel.

I relive the pain of torment and grief,
Memories which had been buried deep:
Oh, let this agony be sharp and brief,
For I cannot awake from this sleep.

I shall face the daggers of my doom,
And be lost below a timeless plain,
Where awaits me an empty tomb,
Bereft of anguish, fear and pain!

My childhood may have been rough but in London, I always had sufficient food and nutrition. Despite an abusive father who berated me constantly, I would seek solace in the tiled corridor of the primary school in which I made wonderful friends and became acquainted with esteemed teachers. There would be generous servings of porridge in school and the only thing I had to worry about was paying attention to the lessons that were being imparted. I was an admittedly difficult pupil in the sense that being trapped in a small overcrowded classroom did not agree with me too well, so more often than not, I would be skipping the morning class and play in the school yard or the cobbled side street leading to the institution. I had begun Year 5 when one morning, my reading instructor, who was an accomplished author and poet, was walking by the school yard and discovered my co-curricular activities. He agreed that young children should be able to play but made me an offer. He promised to give me ten pence if I wrote lines of poems for him. As an avid writing enthusiast, he said if I wrote well thought prose, he would reward me monetarily and try to print it in the school's monthly newsletters. My writing endeavor flourished more than I had expected and the few pounds I managed to receive per week in exchange of writing poems were more profitable than anything I've done thus far. I was content with my achievement and shared the news with my mother. She was not superbly well-versed in English but I managed to translate the lines into Russian for her. My dear mother was so proud of my achievement that she would stay awake at night and try to learn the English language properly so she could read my short-handwritten lines of poetry. She would lovingly dream that I would become as accomplished as the great Russian artist Pushkin. I believe it was the zeal of learning the English language that drove her to take evening classes.

My mother took great pains to hide her language classes from my father but was unsuccessful. He caught her one evening returning from a GCSE preparation class and he became livid in anger. I shall never forget that awful night. My ferocious father brutally beat her senseless for daring to venture outside without his permission and my mother had to be hospitalized for a fractured ankle and a concussion.

My heart was tinged with guilt because at that time, I thought it was on my account that my mother had suffered. My life in London until Year 6 did not present any violent experience and I surpassed my peers in language and arts. My English teacher ultimately succeeded in publishing a handful of my poetry in the local school magazine. The school offered the pupils education and regular meals, so I did not recognize the meaning of poverty and negligence until I arrived in the decrepit orphanage in Russia.

When the dilapidated bus dropped me off at the edge of a mud road that had frozen into a dark glassy hill, I looked in horror at the plain brick house that was to be my home. Nothing in England was remotely similar to the squalid exterior. An elderly man waved at me to get inside. I entered a small, low-ceilinged room and found that it was densely packed. Dozens of children, most of them who looked older than me, looked at my clothes with wild eyes.

The orphanage was located in eastern Siberia where the winters could become very harsh. My parents were from Russia, I had no doubt, yet I felt like a stranger here, living alone and friendless in the chilled villages. I spent a lot of my time indoors and tried to remember my mother's beautiful face and her large bright green eyes. It was hard for me to believe that she was really gone. In the secret corner of my head, I often dreamed of the day my mother would stroll up to the private children's house and take me home. It was easier to think she was still alive, living somewhere safe, waiting for me to come home.

It was a small room; not even adequate for ten people yet forty adolescents were stuffed in it for the entire year. Three or four children were allotted a specific bunk, that lacked the basic necessities. A damp layer of straw and hay covered the cheap wooden boards. When I shivered uncontrollably, and begged my comrades for a blanket, an older boy offered his. It was a tattered thin sheet with approximately twenty holes in it. I wrapped myself desperately with the blanket and tried to sleep. But sleep was a luxury for I could not even close my eyes for ten seconds without being prodded awake by the rats that roamed about the lodging and hid amongst the straw and hay.

Every morning, I would awake with bizarre looking cuts and swellings on my arms and legs. Bedbugs would occupy every inch of the dirty blankets and bite us mercilessly throughout the night. I became tired of hunting the fleas that infested my bed. Hundreds of lice dug into my clothes, making my skin raw from the frequent bites. I did not know how to get rid of them. The place where we slept was so poorly built that despite the sub-zero temperature, I often wished to venture outside.

A terrible bout of fever lingered over us, and one after the other, the boys fell ill, and I too could feel fever burning my skin. A splitting headache drowned my senses but I could feel the soreness of each muscle that cried out with even the slightest motion. Each night, the damp coldness exasperated my illness. The second day, the temperature dropped by another ten degrees and that night I thought I would surely die. One of my friends who had bronchial pneumonia died, succumbing to high fever. We had huddled to conserve body heat and most of us fell asleep, and the young teen lay dead in our midst, with none of us even realizing that he had passed away. By this time, I had succumbed to despair, and several times a day, broke down in wild tears, reminiscing my childhood and dreading my uncharted future.

Life on the snowy hills outside was oppressively sad for me. This was not my home. I felt like an uninvited stranger, overtaken by melancholy and gloom. The moonless evening would remind me how hopeless the future was. There was nothing for me here. Often, I wept in despair and the pale night sky bore witness to my desolate weakness.

We were always hungry. I was a thin boy since childhood, but at the Russian orphanage, my weight loss alarmed even myself. Every week, I could feel my shirt becoming looser. My trousers would slip and fall due to severe malnourishment. I thought hunger was my worst enemy at the orphanage until I fell ill with chronic dysentery. I had to use the bathroom twenty to thirty times daily. I wish I could describe the agony I was feeling. My stomach and intestines were twisting inside my body, making me feel as though the organs were being ripped open. Medical care was nonexistent and only occasionally would the caretaker offer me activated charcoal to cool my stomach.

It was winter again, and my diarrhea was not abating. But life became five times worse. I had to leave the mildly heated interior in order to relieve myself. That meant a five-yard stroll through the harshest blizzard, dressed only in thin rags. Sometimes, I would not be able to control my bowel movement and my intestines would give away, spilling the watery excrement down my legs, soiling my underclothes. These occurrences were more deadly than mere embarrassment. It was fifty degrees below freezing and even a five-minute walk in that cold air would freeze my soiled clothes, and cause me to catch pneumonia all over again. At night, I would lay down on the loose planks that comprised of my bed and trembled with cold, fatigue, and hunger. In the morning, my fingers and toes would be nearly frozen.

I began to believe it was my destiny to suffer. The only thing I had to wait for was when I would finally drown in my own despair. The agony was endless.

The hunger and fever, together with extreme dehydration from diarrhea made me wish I was dead. Living was so hard, too fruitless. To cope with my pathetic condition, I would lie on my stomach, clinging to my bunk, hoping some miracle would deliver me from this hardship, but help never came. Wood lice and cockroaches plagued the meagre lodging I lived in and added to the overall misery.

The fellow boarders who were housed with me could not understand my plight. They were locals, native to this land. Most had lived in the orphanage all their lives. I never heard anyone complain of high fever or diarrhea. It seemed that they were not allergic to the roach infested food which the authority served here. Once a day, we were offered thin soup. I don't know why they called it soup because it was little more than salt and water. With burning hunger, I would swallow the watery soup in one gulp and wait for more, but there were no second servings. I regretted almost instantly for devouring my meal because that would be when my stomach pains would begin and I would have to go out to relieve myself, trudging through the heavy storm. I was so alone- a mere speck amidst the snowy wastes of Russia's winter landscape. My heart ached from pain and sadness. I missed my mother. I almost forgot what it felt like being loved. In the state-run orphanage, I felt rejected by society and family and was reduced to physical and mental ruin.

I would occasionally scream and shout with frustration. No one helped me. In helpless rage, I would tell the other children in the house that I will run away from this place and never come back. They were unmoved by my frustrations. The older boys thought I was

being disdainful. They would say I am different, that my Russian was different; it was too refined. They often formed gangs to bully me, claiming I must have been born in privilege.

One year after I was dropped off at the Siberian children's house, my stomach became slightly compatible with the meager food. My overall health improved even though I was slightly underweight. But I was able to devote more time in my education and began to hold myself accountable.

Within two years, the state-run school adjacent to the orphanage I was living in offered me a scholarship. Spending my childhood in England paid off because it meant I surpassed my peers in speaking and comprehending the English language. My exam results were above average and my teachers felt I could excel in math and English as well. I also found Russian literature to be fascinating. By this time, I had come to appreciate my mother's writing skills. I religiously read a few pages from her diary every night. The worn pages of her journal were the only reminder of the sweet person who had taken care of me even at the risk of her own life. I survived infancy and adolescence because of her undying love. Despite the terrors my father had made me endure, I found a purpose in life, a reason to go on.

Memories from my childhood weren't entirely pristine. I lived in a dystopian household where the slightest mistake could cost dearly. I remember a scene from my eighth birthday. I got home later than usual. Charles and I were taking turns riding his bicycle when I finally noticed the sky had become dark and rushed home to avoid the severe chastisement I knew was in store for me. I tried to enter quietly through the front door but it had been bolted. Rapping on the door would be precarious- my strict father might be home and I was not willing to give up so easily so I tried the back door. With a sinking feeling in my heart, I curled up outside the patio and fell asleep. My mother must have noticed my absence and she opened the back door to find me sleeping in the cold concrete. I was immensely grateful that she found me but my joy was short-lived. The menacing roar of my drunken father was nearing the kitchen.

I froze in terror. I knew what would happen to me. I stared pleadingly at my mother- she tried to intervene and begged him to calm down, but with a violent thrust of his arms, he flung her across the kitchen and grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. I was being dragged to the sitting room. Frozen with fear and helplessness, I braced my body for a volley of curses and beating, but my father didn't think pounding his clenched fist at me was enough. He took his belt, double folded and began to strike me with it. One, two, three...ten...twenty. I stopped counting as the blows kept cutting into my back, ripping my shirt in many places. The next morning, I could feel my skin peeling out. There were bulges in my back that were agonizingly distressing. I wanted to remain home and cry until my anger and sadness abated but it was not an option. If my father found out I had skipped school, he would find yet another excuse to beat me, so I donned on two shirts to hide the scars on my arms and back and dutifully headed to school.

It happened again a fortnight later. He accused me of speaking insolently and so the punishment began. I was clinging to my mother's leg, trying avoid his blows but my father pulled me off, flinging me across the kitchen with a malicious kick. For over an hour, he repeatedly hit, kicked, and pummeled me until my mind ceased processing the pain.

Забыли

Не знаю, сколько горя жизнь выльет на меня,
Меняются сезоны, сменяет жар зима.
Но только боль и слезы несут ветра ко мне,
О грустных днях из детства напоминая мне.

Так тяжки катастрофы, что Красноярск принес,
Но с ними не сравнится та мука, когда рос
Я маленьким мальчишкой, что маму потерял,
Проститься не успели, как час ее настал.

Страдания как оковы преследуют меня,
Друзья мои, вы знали ту боль, как боль моя?
Продолжить эту жизнь мне, иль проще умереть?
Жизнь снова рассмеётся иль будет доброй впредь?

Я потерял улыбку, один ли я такой?
Другие еще любят? Смеются под луной?
Жаль, нет такого зелья, чтоб боли заглушить;
Жаль, что никто не может мне сердце починить.

Пожалуй, Смерть лишь может весь ужас прекратить,
Сотрет ли смерть, что гложет, иль может хуже быть?
Не знаю, не узнать мне, мне смерть врагом была:
Бесчувственной, холодной, что маму забрала.

Как мама поживает, теперь мне не узнать,
Но, всё же, я надеюсь, сойдемся с ней опять!

Жаль, не могу я с мамой сейчас поговорить,
И что не спас от Смерти, прощенья попросить.
О, как же я тоскую по свету её глаз,
Что путь мне освещали как звезды в ночной час.

Сдержу сегодня слёзы, хоть горе не унять,
Ведь если дать им волю, не кончатся опять.
Нет края тем страданиям, они внутри горят,
Дыхание и разум огнём испепелят.

My brain tried to forget those dark memories, but this journal was refreshing in that the memories here were not mines; they were my dear mother's. It was in one of the journal entries that I found out about my maternal grandmother. I knew she sometimes wrote to my mother while we lived in London but I didn't know what she looked like. In my mother's diary, she wrote fondly and somewhat proudly about the war stories she had heard from her mother. It seemed that my grandmother was a partisan fighter during the Second World War and had fought against the Germans in the frontlines. The horrors of that era were evident in those loosely written entries. I was particularly affected by how much the women of the Soviet Union suffered during the Great Patriotic war. Nearly a million women served in the army, occasionally excelling in sharpshooting and flying bomber jets.

My grandmother was however a ground fighter who had joined ranks with the Soviet Army and took part in local offensives. Being born in London meant I knew little about the history of the USSR and was interested to learn about the daily experience faced by Red Army soldiers. One of the small excerpts of the diary mentioned how my grandmother was trapped with her unit in the uplands by a hill, where the German punitive forces were approaching from all sides. The unit hid inside the swamps where the mud would swallow anything that fell in it.

In order to avoid capture and death, the Soviet team remained submerged in neck-deep water for days, trying to stay hidden from the Germans who were rapidly closing in on them. A week earlier, the same group of Germans had massacred the entire village nearby, and burned her mother and three little sisters and baby brother in a bonfire. Everyone knew getting caught was not an option. There was a woman who had recently given birth to a child and the baby was crying very loudly due to hunger. The mother could not nurse the baby and the Germans who were hunting them with dogs were nearby. If they had heard the sound of the child, they would all have been killed. No one asked the mother to make the sacrifice but the mother knew she had to make a terrible decision and slowly held the child

and held it underwater in order to silence it, risking the baby's life so the fifty-eight Soviet fighters could survive, but everyone in the unit felt guilty and pained afterwards. It was one of the many sacrifices that the Soviet women faced during the war.

My perspective in life changed dramatically as I read more and more of her journals. My mother wrote about her origins, her birth, her father. I was stunned to learn that mother was not entirely ethnic Russian. Her mother was from Ryazan but had married a man from Grozny and moved with him to the North Caucasus region. I was surprised to find out that my maternal grandfather was an influential man in his area with numerous business ventures in Dagestan. But my mother's rosy life history ended there. The pages that followed narrated a very frightening event. I was curious, pained and shocked to learn of the horrors my mother faced.

She wrote that when she was sixteen, she wanted to become a fashion model and dancer. Her friends used to tell her how there was no one prettier among all of the Caucasian Mountain people. Without being able to secure permission from her severely strict father, who insisted that girls from good families do not become dancers, my mother travelled to Russia alone and found a small academy where she trained to be a ballet dancer.

She was a natural and after several months, she was part of a dance troupe that held shows at a local councilman's mansion. There were many celebrities and politicians among the audiences. My mother's graceful charms caught the eye of a photographer who had worked for a modeling agency. The official approached her and offered her a chance to sample their clothes for a brief show in Moscow. My mother was ecstatic. It was her dream to become a runway model in Moscow. After six months of training, she was granted the chance to walk the runway along with other models. She did wonderfully and received warm praises from the audience. One elderly man in the audience showed particular interest in her. My mother, being a shy sixteen-year-old girl, spurned his advance and went about her own way.

She was on her way to her apartment when special security men escorted her from the street and bundled her in a van. When she was allowed to disembark, she noticed that she was at a palatial manor. The short stately looking man who was enamored with her at the modeling agency was in fact a powerful leader in the Soviet Union. My mother froze in shock. The man asked her to marry him, but his only condition was it was to remain a secret, as for personal reasons, he did not want to appear in public as married man. He also offered her plethora of money and gifts. My mother did not initially accept his proposal and. In her diary, my mother mentions specifically that she was a virgin and didn't know what to do. Her family didn't know she had gone to Moscow. If she went missing, no one would come looking for her, so she wrote a letter to her family seeking permission to this martial union. They gave their blessing guardedly, but they were married secretly soon after.

Her life was rather uneventful after she arrived at the palatial house. She was married to the powerful man but lived almost as a personal mistress of the communist leader. After a few months, she became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. I was a healthy child and my father was fond of me, but according to mother's journal, her life's dilemma began soon after my birth.

The man who married my mother immediately removed her from the capital city and in order to remove her from the jurisdiction and influence of her former husband, he moved with her to England. When they arrived in North London, I was only five months. The young guard of the Soviet politician stood by his word and told his employers and others that the child belonged to him. Thus, soon after I came to this world, my life revolved under the protection of a man who was not my biological father but chose to adopt me in an effort to save my mother's honor.

I don't know why my mother never told me that the man who was constantly beating me and abusing her was not my real father. Judging from the harsh treatment he meted out to me, I often wondered if he was a random man who despised me. I guess he did despise me since I was not his son at all. I was the unofficial son of his employer, a powerful Soviet era politician who was a great statesman but did not want to announce his marriage to the public. As I was reading my mother's diary, for a brief moment, I let my thoughts drift to the man who I knew to be my father. For ten years, I suffered in silence as he whipped me with sticks and belts. I wept quietly at night when he beat up my mother. Now, he was in prison for the murder of a woman he did not intend to kill. He was aiming his gun at me, hoping to finish me off when my mother used her body to shield me from death. Her dying act was to protect me- to save the life of the son who could not help her. That fateful night, when my father grabbed mother by her hair and was slapping her, I had every intention of shooting him, but my father or stepfather seized the weapon viciously from my grip and tried to shoot me in drunken rage. How was I, a ten-year-old frail child, to know that my mother would leap in front of him at the last moment inadvertently taking the bullet that was meant for me?

For years, I shuddered in anger when I saw my mother meekly tolerating her husband's crude behavior and verbal and physical assault. I could not imagine why someone would be docile and take so much pain from someone without exacting revenge. But now as I think about it, I wonder if she was being grateful to him for agreeing to marry her soon after I was born. The guard took a huge risk in marrying the former wife of a Soviet politician. I did not forgive the man for abusing and vilifying my mother for ten years, and I could not forget the psychological torture I faced from him, but I did understand why he was so upset with me. My existence was unwelcoming

to him. Even then, I realized with shock that he had taken a huge risk in claiming paternity for me when he knew the truth about my birth could have put his life in grave danger, because unbeknownst to me, my biological father had been looking earnestly for me. He never told me the truth. He always allowed me believe that he was my real father.

Despite what he did to save my mother's life, I can never forget or forgive the moment he pulled the trigger of the hunting rifle and fired the weapon that had killed my mother. My beautiful kind mother who never even scolded in the decade I lived with her, who always tried to soothe me when my father bellowed at me, had to die so young only because the angry man tried to fire his weapon at me. Oh, I wish so much that my mother never blocked the bullet. Maybe I would have survived- but my mother didn't have to die for me. It was so cruel for the world to snatch her away from me, when I was a scared little boy. I had no one in this world. No one loved me. Nobody cared if I lived or died. My existence was worthless. To everyone. Except my mother.

Reading my mother's diary changed the way I viewed the world. I was no longer content with staying locked in a Siberian orphanage. I was unhappy in here. I wanted to see the world. I hoped that I could leave behind the abyss of sorrow in which I was born into.

I collected enough money to buy a train ticket to St. Petersburg and met with other street children there. I had just turned sixteen and was eager to start working. I approached several storekeepers and asked if there was anything I could do for them in exchange of some money. Most of them turned me away but one young man hesitated and handed me an envelope of medication. He said if I could sell them, then I could keep half the profit. I had little idea what I was being cajoled into but I went about the day, offering packets of tablets and cigarettes to pedestrians. I profited handsomely and the storekeeper allowed me to keep half the money.

Weeks later, I became more comfortable in the city and got acquainted with several other teenagers who roamed the streets. They were plotting a heist and wanted my help. I was hesitant at first but eventually agreed to go with them. It turned out to be an armed robbery on a money exchange center next to a warehouse. My peers were busy pocketing the goods when one of the guards reached out and grabbed for the gun a boy was holding. The gun went off and the man fell back. The other boys panicked and ran. I wanted to get as far from the place as possible but the dying man was groaning and begging for help. He wanted to say something. When I looked into his eyes, I saw the pleading look that my mother had in her face when she was shot by the bullet of a hunting gun. The image haunted me, and as I stared at the man, I froze in my spot. I couldn't move. I couldn't hear anything at all. All I saw was my mother's beautiful face. I was still in the dazed state when police arrived and arrested me on charges of murder. Although the weapon was nowhere near me, they somehow believed that I was the one who shot the man. It was perhaps the obvious conclusion because all my peers had fled, including the one who had fired the bullet.

What happened after that was another part of my history. I was destined to be executed on charges of manslaughter, but due to unexpected twists of fate, my execution date was the day I was reborn and given a new life. I was told this was a second chance.

The events that followed spanned decades.

The Camp.

The colonel.

Mikhail, the man who trained me into becoming a blitz commando. And who had also risked his life numerous times to protect me.

I was whisked away to a vast uncharted region, which I later learned was a fortified forest in the middle of Siberia. It was here I learned the most valuable and also the most dangerous skills in my life. Diligent instructors taught me and hundreds of other youths how to assemble weapons. The training Camp took up a space of roughly twenty square kilometers and was situated in a Siberian Forest. The impregnable training grounds was surrounded by such thick forest that not even a bicycle could pass through. And the only way to the other cities were via air evacuation, and young recruits like myself longed for one of those highly coveted chopper rides which our commander, known simply as the Colonel, used to fly each day. We all knew that the Colonel was in charge of a very serious and powerful organization, which had the unique responsibility of conducting domestic and foreign espionage assignment. His helicopters were highly valued and rightly so, for in case of an emergency, life and death was decided pending the outcome of whether the helicopters were available. The camp had two medical centers in doors as well as a field hospital in case of emergencies, but if anyone required special heart transplant or urgent brain surgery, then there was little chance help could reach us in time. One of the unlicensed helicopters would have to fly the patient out, but is for some inexplicable reason, the air traffic was hampered, or air route was grounded due to hazardous weather conditions, which was quite common in this part of the USSR, then staying alive could become rather difficult.

The first month at the Camp was frightening for me, because twice I had attempted to escape but was caught the first time. The second time, I made it approximately ten kilometers into the depths of the freezing ice-covered forest, before succumbing to the bitter cold winds, which caused me to become delirious and lose the sensations in my feet. I was able to make my way back to the Camp's unmarked perimeter before collapsing to my knees. The coldness was attacking me like a merciless enemy. I cried in a voice full

of terror, begging for help, but soon, the howling noise of the wind died down and I fainted. The guards had heard my cries and took me inside.

My fainting fit was followed by a shivering in which my knees knocked together and my teeth chattered uncontrollably, and then came a terrible fever and my mind wandered into the land of death and pain. I was filled with a new kind of terror, as though my brain was already dead and would never return to this living world again. I was so frightened by my illness, that I scarcely knew what to do. I was only partially conscious but could hardly hold myself up. I was then dragged on my knees to the Colonel's office, who observed my pitiable state. My whole body had broken into a cold sweat again, and I was shaking. I felt my knees giving way, but forced myself to remain on my feet. The Colonel did not speak. His stern face, and pale tight lips betrayed no emotion, but he apparently sent me to the medical quarters for treatment. That day, I was moved to a room in the guards' quarters, where I lay for four days and eventually got back my health. The guards in the Camp were battle-hardened tough men, but they were kind to me, and one of them was a nurse and he felt my forehead to check if I still had fever. His blue eyes flashed with sympathy as he told me that I was lucky to be alive.

When I recovered from the fever, the instructors in charge of the new recruits decided I deserved a punishment in order to dissuade others from trying to escape. I was placed in a small prison within the camp, and forced to exercise twelve hours each day. It was a solitary cell, with almost no amenities but I was served three meals each day. For breakfast, a guard would bring me corn porridge with meat. Breakfast and lunch were distributed to me by a different guard, who said I had to finish the meal under his personal supervision. For one month, the meals of each day were identical. I was served Borscht, a soup made with beetroot, and a porridge of buckwheat which was lukewarm and filled a small tin to the rim. I survived the hardships and tried to learn valuable skills from my Russian peers and comrades, until I felt as though I belonged there. I participated in group work-outs because we knew these skills would keep us alive in adverse situations. Each morning, pairs of recruits would move to the gym floor, shuffling in a wide circle, stretching and loosening our muscles and flexing the shoulders, quadriceps and arms to prepare for hand-to-hand combat. The training became more and more strict each day, and we had to add prolonged abdominal stretches to our daily regimen in order to qualify for the intensive somersaults, cartwheels and sprints. The final challenges were executing the hand-walking and flips most gracefully, without injuring oneself. In addition to these skills, all recruits were required to learn American boxing, judo and wrestling. With time, life became more tolerable for me at the Camp, but while I was training to my utmost ability, I did not know that the future would not be so tolerant of me. I thought this Camp was suffocating with its vast clearings and numerous buildings, but if I only knew what challenges was ahead of me, then this place would have felt very free and liberating.

During my terrible ordeal in various prisons and serving under the manipulative reign of the NSA's former black division's director, I often contemplated over my miserable life and even recalled the memories of my days of childhood, which too had been bathed with sorrow's tears. Yes, there may have been some who suffered more than I, and they perhaps never needed to weep, or even hated the tears they had to shed, but during the time I was trapped in the terrible life, I sincerely did not think that any man on the face of earth could have faced such agony from such a young age. I was drowning in sadness, but was forced to hide my grief and oceans of tears from those around me, because I did not want others to think I was vying for attention or exaggerating my emotions. How could they ever understand what torments I was forced to endure? My life was not an open book but the heavens were a witness that I had suffered unspeakably throughout my turbulent childhood and brazen adolescence.

I recalled the first time I was locked in the sublevel recruiting section of the Camp.

Like all recruits at the Camp, fear of death and pain made me accede to the inevitable acclimatization, but I refused to believe this was my destiny. I would not become a killing machine for the Colonel or his group. When I was first tasked with an assassination of a former agent who had fled the camp weeks earlier, I could not think clearly. My chief instructor, Mikhail, handed me his personal weapon and told me to fulfill my mission if I ever wanted to leave this place alive. The sorrow, the cruelty of my task was overwhelming. I was being ordered to kill a fellow recruit who had done exactly what I had been dreaming about for the past year: escape.

The world held only dark prospects ahead: I could not see the tiniest shimmer of hope remaining for me in the future. The escort team who was supposed to accompany me murmured impatiently, ordering me to move ahead, to head outside. I glanced at the stoic faces around me, the gun suddenly feeling heavy in my hands. I could not do it. I would never be able to hunt down and kill someone who had done nothing wrong. Unbeknownst to myself, my eyes watered as I stared at the weapon with cloudy vision. I knew what I had to do. There was only one way to freedom. I slowly raised Mikhail's gun and put the barrel in my mouth and pulled the trigger.

"NO!" Mikhail roared, running towards me, his shout reverberating across the interior of the subterranean space. He jumped forward, grabbing my hand but I had already pulled the trigger.

Nothing was more disappointing to me in my life than to hear the empty click of the weapon. Before I could try and fire the gun again, Mikhail wrenched it from my hand and whispered furiously. "You are lucky I always keep the first chamber empty."

Unsuccessful at this suicide attempt, I crumpled face down on the floor, breaking into fits of angry sobs, furious at Mikhail for not letting me die.

He was walking away from me, when without explanation, he turned and fired a single shot at me. His bullet ripped through my lower leg and tore several muscles. I howled in pain, clutching my leg, but Mikhail ignored me and headed to the exit.

Before the door closed behind him, he made eye contact with me. Mikhail looked worried. "That wound should keep you busy for a while and away from missions. But remember. I won't save you next time." He added before shutting the air pressure door behind him.

It was many months later, my trainer held a long conversation with me. I had just returned from an undercover mission in the Balkans and three of my partners were dead. It was a devastating blow for me. I refused medical attention for my wound that had partially punctured my lung. Mikhail showed up that afternoon and told me he knew why I was acting suicidal. He realized I refused medical treatment because I wished my life would end soon. It seemed grossly unfair that I should return from a mission alive when my comrades were murdered and often tortured to the point of insanity. I told Mikhail I longed to end my miserable life and live with my mother in the afterlife. Upon hearing this, Mikhail rebuked me severely and claimed that if I tried to take my own life, I would never be able to see my mother in the next life. Suicide would damn my soul, he said, and forever separate me from my mother. After hearing this, as much as it was difficult to live on, I persevered.

When I eventually graduated from the rigorous programs in the Camp, a new chapter opened for me. Within the span of two years, I finally ended up in the United States as an undercover Soviet spy.

As part of my undercover identity, I was John, the American teen who was studying in high school. However, I felt nothing like and American. I could speak in accent less English due to my history of living in London and studying English from a young age, but I couldn't relate to the uncultivated culture. Until I saw the woman who looked almost identical to my mother. The same large eyes. The beautiful round face, only she was a foot shorter. And she was crying. The woman couldn't have been older than thirty. I remembered my mother at that age. She too used to cry constantly. Instinctively, I began to worry about her well-being. Was she being abused and battered like my mother? What could be the reason for her being so sad? I resolved to find out and followed her to her home. I discovered that she had a husband who was around her age. The man looked foreign, possibly Indian. They took evening walks around Central Park. I could hear them argue. The woman wept constantly because she didn't have children. I felt so sad for her that I wished she would have many fine children in the future. Seeing that Russian woman in tears pained me because it reminded me of my own mother. My childhood memories were deluged in pain and sorrow because my abusive father would beat my mother mercilessly.

The only memories I had of my parents were bitter and filled with tears and shouts. I remember my father beating my mother for the smallest reasons. If the dinner was cold, or if the pizza crust was too thick, he would smash her head against the wall.

I recall one of the worst episodes of my childhood. It was soon after my eighth birthday. I was old enough to understand that my mother was suffering. One evening, she received a letter from her mother, my maternal grandmother who lived in Ryazan, a city not too far from Moscow. She wanted mother to visit her in Russia as she was gravely ill and did not want to die without seeing her daughter and grandson. Despite being banished from home at an early age, my mother did not hold grudge against her parents and wanted desperately to see her mother for the last time. But when she broached the subject to my father, he burst into raging fury and began to hit her with everything he found in the house. He shouted so loudly that I was certain neighbors could hear. He kept repeating: how dare you suggest leaving me without permission- only to visit your useless mother in Russia. My mother wept incessantly and helpless tears poured down her beautiful face. I cried all night thinking about her sadness and pain.

The next morning, my mother was awake and had prepared breakfast for me. I saw the dark scars and welt on her neck and arms as she worked in the kitchen. That terrible abusive man had beaten her for so long that her body was scarred. As my mother washed the dishes, I grabbed my bowl of porridge and stood leaning against her, finishing my breakfast. I wanted to help her, protect her, but what could I do. I was a skinny little boy who was afraid of the large drunken man who roared and bellowed all the time. My mother noticed me at her side and she stroked my head.

I looked at her beautiful but sad face and said, "Mom, when I grow up, I will buy a big house where you and I can live together. I won't father come near our place, ever."

My mother gave a watery smile and held me close to her side.

I looked at the deep scar on her right arm and ran my small hands over it. "I will also become very rich and earn millions of pounds so I can take you to a plastic surgeon and remove these marks from your arms, so your skin can become beautiful like before."

I had only a day earlier learned about plastic surgery from students in my school and I knew how I could help my mother with it. For a long time, I narrated my wish list to my mother, who listened emotionally to my boyish dreams. She did not speak much but I could see the lingering pain in her eyes. My heart ached to see her drowning in grief so I kept dreaming of future bliss.

Soon, it was time for me to graduate from the American high school and head to college, where I was to maintain my cover as a Soviet spy.

1979 – The Mission

It was 1979, and I was just dispatched from the Soviet Union to be a spy in America. My English was almost American accented and I blended well with local crowds, but I always had a lingering feeling in my head that every passerby was staring at me, and that every gun was trained on me, and every police was suspicious of me.

Since I was not an American-born person, no one in the NSA or the CIA trusted me. I was a young boy, barely out of my teens and this vast country of millions of international residents felt superbly foreign to me, but Richard was the only person in the world I could turn to and share my apprehensions and fears. The only other person who knew my true identity was the elderly woman who accompanied me to the United States. Anastasia was an operative for the GRU and had served in Germany, England and America for nearly thirty years. My handlers at the Camp thought it was safer for me to arrive in America with her, and while she had her own duties, officially Anastasia passed as my mother on U.S. tax forms or other documents. Richard knew the truth about who Anastasia was, and he supported me both financially and psychologically and even became a father figure to me. I trusted him with my life, and was pleased to take care of any task he may have asked me to do.

I was sent to North Africa to retrieve a cache of diamonds which Richard insisted had rightfully belonged to him before his business partners stole it from him. I took a local flight to arrive at my destination and help with Richard's cause. However, on my way in transit, I came across a familiar couple outside the arrivals section of Iran's Isfahan Airport. It was the Russian woman, along with her husband. I was pleased to see someone who was so dear to me, so I decided to take a short break from my work and accompany them on their trip. I found out that they had been scheduled to visit a very busy and religious center known as Mecca, but had stopped in their native Indian home for one week. I accompanied them to Asia and was interested to see the mountainous regions of Afghanistan, the hilly uplands of Pakistan and the rich rice fields in India and Bangladesh. It was the first time I spent so much time in the Indian subcontinent, and after their trip, I accompanied the young couple to the final leg of their journey. It was a bustling city in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and since I had never been to Mecca, I decided to pay the ancient town a visit.

Upon arriving in Mecca, I was stunned by the glamor of the sleepless city. Tens of thousands of pilgrims from all walks of life constantly marched in religious fervor. I was delighted to find a unique feature in the Arabic holy city. It was a holy well, whose water was believed to be endless and contained many health benefits. I was less interested in the superstitious beliefs about the water, which locals had named Zamzam, but found the taste to be incredibly invigorating. I drank to my fill, and soon after, left for North Africa and completed Richard's task properly. I was able to retrieve all of the uncut diamonds and gave it to Richard. He was very pleased with my performance, and invited me to join him and Cynthia for dinner. For the next few months, I paid several visits to the holy water well in Mecca, and toured the ancient city. It was a new experience for me, since I had never known that such relics and tribal heritage could exist in this modern world. The golden deserts and the towering mountains of Arabia offered endless views for a tourist like me.

It was six months later that I paid another visit to Saudi Arabia. However, the tour guide who had promised to show me the main fountain of the Zamzam well, announced that the government had declared a local emergency. Due to several explosions in the water pump, the Zamzam well was losing water pressure and pilgrims were beginning to suffer from thirst. I panicked and immediately began to investigate the cause of the explosion. I climbed nearly a hundred feet below the main well supply depot and tried to find out what had happened.

Locals considered Zamzam to be the holy water in Islam, and were naturally very disturbed by the interruption. While I was investigating the source of the explosion, I felt a tremor in the basement room, and large chunks of rock crashed to the ground. I smelled the distinct burning smoke of dynamite, and realized it was definitely sabotage. Someone was deliberately trying to detonate enough explosives inside the Zamzam well in order to halt the supply of water permanently. I panicked when I thought that millions of

locals and pilgrims would likely die of thirst if this ancient well was to be destroyed. The tunnel I was going through was beginning to fill with smoke, but I began to crawl to the source of the noise. Whoever detonated the device must have been nearby.

I knew that the water drawn from the well of Zamzam well was directly connected to the electrical pumps of the central city system, and disrupting the well could have jeopardized the water supply for the entire city, as well as cause countless casualties, mainly due to the location of the well. The Zamzam was just twenty-two meters away from the temple of Abraham, a cuboid brick house considered to be the site of pilgrimages for millions of believers.

The Zamzam well is about 35 meters deep and taps groundwater. I inspected the electric pumps that were used to draw the water. The water was then made available throughout the religious arena surrounding the temple of Abraham, via water fountains and dispensing containers.

The Zamzam well was vital to the people of this city who were forced to live in this hot dry valley with very few sources of water.

I asked a local city leader if it was possible that the water supply had dried out naturally, but the man, who was also known as the sheik, insisted that among the miracles of God, one was that the reserve of Zamzam water never depleted over the years and would likely flow on till the ends of time. Locals assured me that since it was a miraculously generated source of water, Zamzam had flowed for thousands of years and there was no reason why it would suddenly dry out.

I recruited two tribal Bedouin leaders who agreed to serve as my guide. They showed me the hidden passageways that led to the water well. I was able to access it from three different angles with adjacent water pumps, and then I saw what I had been searching for. There were large cylinders, containing five-hundred-pound bombs attached to each of the Zamzam well pumps. The timers were set to go off at the same time.

I hurriedly got to work, and began to separate the detonator from the explosive charges, but I was running out of time. I was disarming the second bomb when I saw a man running away from us down the exit tunnel. I raced after him, and tackled him from behind. He gave out a cry, and I immediately recognized his familiar voice. It was Norbert Kocher, Richard's trusted adjunct who worked with me at the NSA black ops division. I was surprised to see that Kocher had been arming all the bombs inside the Zamzam wells. I demanded an explanation and all he said was that he was following Richard's orders. I later forced him to tell me where the other bombs were fixed, and together, we were able to halt the detonation just in time. However, it took local authorities in Mecca another four days to repair the damages in the well, and resume pumping up water for the thirsty pilgrims.

Upon returning to the United States, I confronted Richard about why he was trying to destroy a five-thousand-year-old well, which was held dear to the locals of Mecca and considered sacred by millions more.

The NSA black ops director burst into tears and apologized, assuring me that he never intended to destroy the precious well, but only wanted to open his own water supplying company. He denied trying to detonate explosives at all, but I pointed out that I personally had to disarm those bombs. Richard looked very embarrassed and admitted that he wanted to destroy only a minor part of the well in order to stop the flow of water to the pilgrims. After one hour of hearing Richard's tearful excuses, I ceased asking him questions and left his office.

Richard initially denied being responsible for the hostage crisis at the Grand Mosque in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, but I discovered that all the leaders of the terrorists had been dutiful employees of his black budget division in the NSA, and they were paid generously to put up a flawless masquerade in which they claimed to be Arabic terrorists, hell-bent on overthrowing the Saudi monarchy and seizing control of the oil-rich nation. All the hostage-takers insisted they were followers of the anti-Christ, and the leader claimed to be Mahdi, a mystic helper of Christ, who was destined to descend on earth in the end of days. The fake Mahdi, and his followers gave rousing speeches of hate and death, and in order to sound like genuine terrorists, they insisted that Alla and Mahomet ordered them to kill all women and children and assault all the elderly citizens of the worlds. The words those mercenaries used in 1979 was starkly similar to the propaganda lines used by another fictional Mahdi in more recent times. I was not surprised to see that once more, Iraq and Syria became the target for someone to create fake terrorist groups like Project ISIS and the mercenaries who were posing as Arab Muslims were ordered to use the same phrases while carrying out executions, bombings or other acts of terror.

A former CIA's Baghdad station chief gave me some other valuable information which I used to track down all the men who were responsible for the four hostage incidents within two years. I found out that they all belonged to Richard's private mercenary group. The main plan of the mercenaries in Mecca was to assassinate the king and the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, and then to seize control of

the holy mosque and declare themselves to be the legitimate rulers. However, hours before the attack took place, a covert unit of the KGB sent word to Saudi royals not to go to Grand Mosque that day due to unspecified threats. They had reports that a group of black ops special forces working independently for an illegal division of the NSA was planning a coup in the gulf kingdom, and it was not safe for the monarch to be present. Obeying the suggestion of the Soviet operatives, the Saudi king and his brother refrained from visiting the holy place that morning and were subsequently spared from the terrible plans.

However, official news reports never reported any involvement of the KGB, but my peers and officers at the Camp were anxious to resolve this conflict and extended full cooperation. It was not surprising that the Soviet Union would help Saudi Arabia, because the Riyadh and Moscow enjoyed remarkably warm relations since the 1920s. Saudi royal family was not about to forget how long before the first world war, Soviet doctors and engineers served dutifully in Jeddah and Taif and many renowned physicians, like Alimbek, who set up pharmacies and clinics in the Saudi kingdom, were greatly praised by the King Abdelaziz. In November of 1979, the KGB's warning to Saudi Arabia in relation to the mercenaries was not the first time the Soviet Union assisted the gulf nation, because years before the World War 2 began, highly-skilled Russian pilot and aircraft technicians moved to the gulf kingdom and created the first Saudi Air Force. Many other Russian specialists helped set up major airbases in Saudi Arabia and personally trained batches of novice Saudi pilots and accompanied the first flights of the royal air squadron.

However, this crisis in Mecca was different from previous upheavals. The men who stormed the Grand Mosque were superbly trained. The leaders of Saudi Arabia utilized their wealth to furnish security and support to defeat the criminals. The once obscure kingdom, which was ruled by desert nomads, Saudi Arabia now had unlimited wealth to expend and welcome the best special forces to defeat the mercenaries. It took more than two weeks of battle to overcome the threat. The main objective of these terrorists was to assassinate the Saudi leaders and seize control of the government.

I gathered evidence and testimonies from numerous eyewitnesses in Pentagon, and found out that the mercenaries who were posing as Arab fighters were mostly trained inside unmarked NSA buildings and had specific orders to kill anyone who resisted. It was a shocking revelation for me to discover that the leaders of the men who hijacked the holy Grand Mosque of Mecca were all paid agents hired by Richard to destroy the Saudi monarchy. Once the crisis was over, and many of the hijackers were arrested, I intercepted a communiqué from Richard's office that instructed the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to immediately execute the hijackers before they got a chance to tell the court or the international media who actually paid them to carry out this mission. In less than one week, the speedy and secretive trials of those hijackers were concluded and they were all executed. I tried to fly back and forth during this time, trying to appeal to the Saudi leaders to hold off the execution so I could personally interrogate the suspects, but they said an anonymous letter arrived at their Riyadh palace which warned them that Mecca would be reduced to a radioactive waste if the men responsible for the hijacking were not killed immediately. Richard had ordered the prince to execute them swiftly before anyone else found out the truth. During 1979, little did I know that a similar fiasco would take place in 2013, when a group known as ISIS terror kingdom, would rear its ugly head and take over many gulf nations and instill fear in the hearts and minds of millions of Iraqis, Yemenis and Syrians. Once again, like the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, few people knew that Project ISIS was entirely fictional and created by an Italian mercenary, even fewer people had any clue that the Mecca hostage takers were not Muslims nor Arabs, but were carefully trained mercenaries working for Richard covert NSA division.

The very same year, Richard sent two hundred mercenaries to Tallinn and ordered them to hire a small group of local anarchists to begin a revolt against the Soviet leaders. I was horrified by this idea. I knew if the NSA mercenaries recruited Estonians to wage an armed insurgency against Soviet Occupation, then the country would collapse in chaos and bloodshed. Engaging in guerilla tactics were unnecessary especially since a quarter of Estonia's population were ethnic Russians and they wanted to be part of the Soviet Union. I begged Richard not to begin a revolution in Estonia but he was adamant and ordered his undercover operatives to pose as Estonians and destroy Communist Party centers and hand out printed pamphlets to locals stating that the Soviet Union was suppressing the Estonian culture and wanted to destroy the blue, black and white Estonian flag. When Richard refused to call off his men, I asked for permission to accompany them to Tallinn, and once I arrived in Estonia, and landed in Tallinn airport, some unidentified men grabbed me and bundled me in a windowless truck. Then they took me to a small cell, and began to interrogate me vigorously. They spoke in the North Estonian language and wanted to know why I was in the country. When I refused to answer, they hung me with chains from the brick walls and left me there for almost two days. It was a terrible dark place. Only during midday, murky rays of light streamed through the tiny window of my cell. I stayed sane by studying the dust motes, which danced silently in one direction as though following some

dreamy leader. At night, large rats scampered around, leaping over my face. By the second day, I caught a serious fever, and my forehead was burning. I felt extremely cold and my head hurt terribly. One of the guards heard my choked sobs and came to check. He felt my head and ordered me to be lowered from the wall. Then they threw me into a regular cell, which housed ten other inmates. The Estonian jail was a cramped place, with fifty twelve-by-twelve windowless cells inside a cement block. I later discovered that we were locked inside a two-story nondescript building. The only furniture in the cold cell was a thin filthy blanket that was so worn that it did not ward off the damp chilliness in the air.

I was suffering from a terrible fever, but the guards said they had instructions not to feed me. I did not cooperate and my punishment was to starve. I watched sadly as other prisoners devoured their porridge and chewy breads. My throat was dry and parched with thirst, but I was not given any water to drink. During the dinner time that day, an old man with gray beard sat next to me. He carried a small bowl on his lap. He told me he was an ethnic Russian priest who had relatives in Estonia and had come to live with them and preach, but during a rally, Estonian demonstrators tried to force him to join them but he refused. Local police later picked him up and locked him inside this cell. I then realized he was in this prison for the same reason as I was. We had tried to prevent Estonians from revolting against the Soviet authorities. The Estonian guards continued to prevent me from eating food.

The next day, the Orthodox priest again gave me his entire bowl of porridge. I refused to eat all his soup, but the old man was insistent that I finish his food, because he knew I was very ill. I was grateful to the religious man for helping me, but he refused to listen to my gratitude, and said he helped me merely because it is the duty of every man of God to help others. One of the guards happened to pass by the cell gate, and when he saw that the Russian priest shared his food with me, he became very angry and shouted for the other guards. They burst into the cell, and grabbed the priest to the damp corridor and beat him severely. In a few minutes, they broke every rib in his body, and caved his skull in. I looked in his horror as the elderly priest fell to the ground, and his face was smashed so thoroughly that he was no longer recognizable as human. I cried out for them to stop, but the guards did not stop beating him until he was dead. Oh! How I prayed to the God whose throne was in heaven, and I wished curses upon these vile men from hurting an innocent priest, and I wished they would burn in the flame of destruction to their dying days. I could not understand how human beings could treat another member of the same race with such vile degradation! Drying my grief-stricken tears, I begged God to curse every desolate hour of these men's lives, and rain fire and brimstone upon these murderers who had no conscience or mercy, who assaulted the old man with impunity. Tears streamed from my eyes, as I saw that the Russian priest was beaten so badly that one of his eyeballs was hanging out on his cheek. Such horror! I could not imagine why a selfless old man suffered for helping me!

I escaped from the tiny prison cell and made my way to the Soviet mission in Tallinn and contacted the local Soviet security headquarters and reported the new developments. They promised to look into the NSA mercenaries and deport them from the country before they could start a revolution.

Moscow promised to be lenient to potential rebels and forgave most of the protesters who took to the streets, but Estonians began to test the limits of Soviet tolerance.

In 1979, I managed to delay the anarchy only for a few years by using the help of my friends in the GRU. Five years after I had prevented the rebellion.

That year, Richard again asked me to accompany five of his best operatives to Eastern Europe. He claimed that the NSA, in collusion with the US State Department, was planning a coup in one of the nations in the Eastern bloc, and my skill was required to them to ensure that democratic governments were safely established in those regions. I tried to convince him that the current republics are organized beautifully under the general authority of the Soviet government, but Richard explained how millions of people were being oppressed in those regions. He produced hundreds of photographs, which showed innocent women and children being executed by Soviet authorities. He also gave me handwritten notes from prisoners who were allegedly tortured by Communist party members. I did not have any method of ascertaining Richard's reports, so I agreed to do the task for him. The next week, I was sent to Hungary and Estonia with a team of mercenaries who told me their job was to break up the Soviet-controlled states one by one. My American colleagues told me that Richard wanted to make Russia so weak that they would no longer have the power to stop his black ops group from seizing power. When I arrived in Europe, perilous political turmoil was going on in both Hungary and Estonia that year, and I saw waves of demonstrations rolling through the streets of the country's capital. Hundreds of citizens of Estonia and Lithuania converged around government buildings, protesting the influence of the Soviet Union on their elected officials and economy, and the presence of Soviet troops in their cities. Estonian protestors tore out the insignia from national flags, leaving a gaping hole in the middle. It became a symbol of the revolution.

When I was sent to the country, the situation looked calm, but soon after, the demonstrations escalated. Neighborhoods organized into militias. Overturned armored cars caught fire and buildings collapsed onto their first floors. Local Estonians engaged in a series of mass demonstrations, and protested vehemently against the Soviet occupation. After tens of thousands of people joined to protest and demanded freedom with massive festivals and demonstrations in the capital of Tallinn, the movement became more and more vocal. Another five years later, the Estonian Congress formally declared Estonia an independent state.

However, during the final days of 1979, two days after Americans celebrated Christmas, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, in order to uphold the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty of 1978. This was particularly shocking to me, since I had only returned from a brief vacation to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India with the Russian couple who lived in my neighborhood.

May 13, 1981

Scarcely six months had passed since Iraqi forces launched air strikes on Iranian air bases, officially beginning the decade-long battle we now know as the Iran-Iraq war. Another devastating event took place.

I had returned from Africa and barely recovered from the unspeakable trauma I had faced in the hands of the rebels there. I tried to remain actively involved in solving the conflict in the Gulf region, but a more pressing matters presented itself in Europe. It was first week of May in 1981, when I found out that someone had left a cryptic threat to the Soviet mission in Warsaw. After decoding the message, Dustin feared that it was a death threat targeted at Helmut Schmidt, who was the leader of West Germany. It was only a day after the Soviet leader met with this man and pledged his commitment to curbing the arms race, but his uncertain health caused concern in the leadership circle. I became worried for the welfare of the German leader, and went to his presidential residence, to ascertain who might be attempting to take his life. After two days of scouring the area, I identified three men who were all wearing black overalls, and carried concealed weapons. I surprised one of the men and knocked him to the ground. While he was still senseless, I searched through his pockets and discovered some curious items. In his wallet, the man contained a Soviet identity card with family photos on Soviet postcards, and his other pockets contained a thick packet of Soviet ruble banknotes and coins. I thought it was strange to see a man in Germany carrying Soviet weapons, cash and identity card. I found a hidden pocket in his gloves which contained an official-looking printed paper. In Russian language, the note mentioned how this man was authorized to kill the German leader in the name of the Communist Party. I locked the man inside my small truck and then captured the other two men who were prowling around the German presidential house. Both carried Soviet identification papers and one of the men had a printed copy of the Soviet Communist Party newspaper Pravda. I studied their faces. One of the men was tanned. His upper arm had a blue and yellow block tattoo. I knew the sign! The official state colors of California were a combination of blue and gold. I knew this because Cynthia had mentioned to me once that the blue color in the flag represented the sky and gold was the color of the precious metal found by forty-niners in California's hills. When I studied the assassins more closely, I saw they looked more American than Russian to me, and my suspicion was confirmed when the second man raised his face. I saw a line of tattoos of the bald eagle and portion of the American flag. I asked them questions in English, but the man with California tattoos pretended not to understand. He insisted he was Russian and said he had orders from the Kremlin to kill the German leader. I contacted two of my dearest friends in Moscow, and they immediately sent a secure diplomatic vehicle to pick up the three prisoners. A team of KGB officers transported them to an unmarked building beside the Krasnoluzhsky bridge in South-West Moscow.

And after interrogating the men and they found out that the three assassins were hired by an unnamed black ops director in the NSA who ordered them to kill the German chancellor and frame the Soviet Union for it. I tried to find out what the NSA director's name was, but the three would-be-assassins were shot dead by a sniper before they could disclose that piece of information. However, I was relieved that I was able to prevent the assassination of the German chancellor. Soon after, a belligerent group in Poland was inciting locals to start a riot by handing out false information in printed pamphlets, which stated that a Soviet invasion of Poland was imminent. This was a false propaganda, but many Polish nationals began to protest violently, and this in turn caused chaos in the capital. Publicly, the Soviet Communist Party newspapers called on Polish Communists to maintain peace and order, but the riot increased.

Shortly after preventing the murder of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, I returned to Poland and began to investigate the cause of the riot. One of the Polish party leaders who spoke to me admitted that an unidentified mercenary had paid him in American dollars to spread false news and pamphlets to his constituents. I tracked down one of his contacts. The man was an assistant military attaché at the Bulgarian Embassy. I decided to fly to Bulgaria and investigate the root of this problem, so I took a private flight to the Plovdiv Krumovo Airport and met with several Soviet operatives in Sofia. One of the intelligence officers warned me that the GRU suspected that someone had hired assassins to kill the Catholic Pope and frame Soviet police for it, the same way they had tried to assassinate Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and blame Moscow for the crime.

I promised to look into it, and hurried back to the where the Pope was due to make an appearance.

I joined the group of faithful men and women who gathered for the Wednesday General Audience. According to Vatican schedules, the Pope John Paul II, was supposed to conduct his customary visit among the ordinary believers. At exactly five p.m., I saw the elderly religious leader ride into view from his open vehicle and begin a slow drive through the St. Peter's Square. He greeted a woman and took his young daughter in his arms for a brief moment. Hundreds of people were lining up to see the saintly figure, and held up rosaries they had brought for the Pope to bless. No one had any clue that the pope was about to get shot. I searched the happy crowd but could not identify any threats. Then the Pope returned the child to her mother, and moved away. Then I heard the gunshot! Instead of looking at the Pope, I studied the crowds, trying to pinpoint the direction where the bullet had come from. There was instant chaos, and I could not see clearly. I noticed the Pope was falling to the ground. He was shot in the abdomen, collapsed in the open vehicle that was taking him around the square. I was stunned! The worst fear flashed in my mind as I thought the Pope was dead.

However, to my utter relief, Pope John Paul II survived the attempt on his life, and after he recovered, he attributed the Blessed Mother's intervention to his survival. It was many months later that I received a sealed message from Moscow, which identified the man who was responsible for hiring the assassins who shot the Pope. The intelligence officers had no doubt that it was Richard who made his mercenaries shoot the Pope and frame Russia for it, in order to turn one billion Catholics against the Soviet Union. However, since Richard wanted the Pope dead, he released a false account of the self-confessed killer as an Istanbul newspaperman who was hired by the Soviet Union. Cynthia's stepfather had paid journalists in the USA to propagate false information about Russia in the American media and made them announce that the assassination attempt had originated from Moscow and that the KGB had instructed the Bulgarian and East German secret services to carry out the mission.

I later found out that Richard had paid five members of the Bulgarian Secret Service to carry out the assassination and pose as visible Muslims while firing the weapons. The assassins were ordered to cry Alla and Mahomet in order to prove to the world that Muslims were responsible for the attack on the Pope. However, when I found out the names of the Bulgarian officers who were firing sniper bullets at the Pope, I immediately alerted two of my friends in the United States Defense Department. I told them that Russia had nothing to do with the attack.

Richard hired many American writers to publish books and articles claiming that the Kremlin instructed by the KGB to assassinate the Pope due to his support of Poland's civil rights movement. For over a year, he constantly paid skilled artists and writers to spread disinformation as news in their books and news bulletins.

Although there was no evidence to support this claim, members of the American media continued to propagate such falsehood. When I finally was able to collect several folders and papers full of valid information about the real killers who were hired to take out the Pope, I mailed those evidence to an honest journalist who lived in Philadelphia. He agreed to air my evidence on the local weekend night show, and for a few hours, I was elated with joy, and hoped that the American public will finally understand that the Soviet government was not responsible for the attack on Pope John. But my joy was short lived. Hours after the journalist aired the news, I received a call from the reporter's secretary. He told me the journalist was dead- shot during a robbery and all his papers and writing samples were stolen. Police ruled the death as a natural burglary gone wrong. I was saddened by the untimely death of the brave reporter, but I was proud of his courage, because he aired the true news proving to the world that the USSR was free of blame in the Catholic Pope's shooting. The next day, headlines of all local newspapers mentioned the alleged assassin of the Pope, and he had released a recorded statement claiming that he tried to kill the Pope due to a deep desire of taking revenge for the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, which took place several months earlier, but that crisis was ultimately resolved when French and Saudi security forces managed to neutralize the militants and kill the self-proclaimed mercenary leader who pretended to be the false Mahdi. Incidentally, the Mahdi idea was far from gone, and after two decades, Richard had hired another group of mercenaries to restore the Mahdi character and like Frankenstein, his protégé, an Italian-American former mafia leader, continued to extend the violent depiction of Arabs and Muslims, and designed and elaborate terror network known as ISIS. Like the mercenary group in 1979, this modern ISIS also had a supreme leader who pretended to be a native Arab, and proclaimed himself to be the Mahdi, the helper of Christ. This man also announced that he had descended to earth because it was the end of times, and would kill all women and children in the name of Alla and Mahomet. In comically fake speeches, the mercenary who was posing as the anti-Christ released hundreds of interviews and videos showing him executing innocent hostages. Many people were able to recognize the utter absurdity of this charade, but many more were confused, and millions of people really believed that the Italian mercenary's Project ISIS was a real terrorist group based in the Middle East.

It would be another three decades later, that the Middle East would become embroiled in another spout of internal conflict, curated and organized by one of the most loyal employees of the NSA black ops team, which primarily included the Italian-American former mafia leader. The operatives in the Middle East were all foreign mercenaries and some Israeli agents who were fluent in speaking Arabic without any accent. As a part of their campaign to turn Arabs against one another, they framed Yemeni locals for a spate of heinous crimes, including launching dangerous weapons against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and assassinated several Arab leaders in UAE.

This made the United Arab Emirates monarch to deploy troops in Yemen in 2015 as part of a Saudi-led military campaign against the mercenaries working for the Italian man, who pretended to be the infamous Iran-backed Houthi rebels. The Yemen war marked the first protracted military campaign abroad for the UAE and their soldiers ended up fighting against highly skilled RAW, CIA, BND, MI5, and SBU operatives, and predictably suffered many military casualties, with scores of Emirati soldiers killed each week. The mercenaries later framed the UAE soldiers for war crimes, and used Emirati air force jets to unleash massive air strikes on residential areas such as markets and hospitals, that caused heavy civilian casualties in Yemen.

I thought that I would never have to be a witness to an attempted assassination again.

But I was wrong.

On October, 1981, another violent episode shook up the Arab world.

On the first week of September, 1981, the Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces called for an emergency meeting. One of the GRU double agents in the American intelligence sector predicted that the president of Egypt might be killed by one of CIA's unofficial operatives. After an emergency meeting near the GRU office beside the Khoroshevskoe highway in Moscow, they decided to send me to Egypt and find out if the West was planning to assassinate the Egyptian president. On the last week of September, I flew to Cairo, and began my investigation with the help of two GRU intelligence officers and a cipher clerk.

We received a tip about a mercenary hideout in Alexandria, so I went there to see if there was any evidence of foul play, but on the road, I received the most devastating news.

President Sadat of Egypt was dead.

It was October 6, 1981.

Local and international news reporters said the Egyptian president was shot to death by militants who shouted the name of Alla and Mahomet moments before tossing grenades at his vehicle. The leader was taking part in a military parade.

I was feeling like an utter failure for being unable to prevent the death of the great Egyptian leader.

The next day, President Sadat was replaced by a man who was a close friend of Richard. I had seen the two men speak over the phone very often, but since the actual assassins had escaped Egypt before the GRU could arrest them, it was only three years later that I found out that Richard had hired those assassins to kill the Egyptian leader. But he did not want the assassination to be traced back to the CIA, NSA or the Pentagon, so he hired locals to shout Arabic words in order to convince eyewitnesses that it was act of a religious extremist.

My only consolation was that I prevented the death of the Pope earlier that year. However, the attacks on the Catholic Pope's life were far from over. It was early 1987 when the second attack was about to take place.

After the assassination attempt failed in the Vatican, a small military newspaper in Washington published an article in which it quoted an unnamed NSA director who claimed that Soviet spies was planning to send an assassin to Poland to kill the Pope during his visit in order to prevent the collapse of the Iron Curtain. I was alarmed to hear this news, and I immediately contacted the Soviet mission in Warsaw and asked them to ensure the Pope's safety when he arrives. I also warned a GRU senior officer that someone in the NSA was probably going to try and frame the Soviet Union for the murder of the Catholic Pope. The American newspaper article detailed how the Soviets feared that the Catholic church in Poland had become the focus for the resistance to their dwindling rule and planned to kill Pope John Paul II when he visited his home country. The next day, a Pentagon official who I had known from before, invited me to his office and told me about a secret communiqué he intercepted between Moscow and Sofia, claiming that the Soviet Military Intelligence had set up a Bulgarian assassin with secret details of the Pope's itinerary and train tickets to where he was due to speak, and would try to kill him.

I was genuinely shocked. He told me that the Soviet Union wanted the Pope dead because of his fiercely anti-communist stance which was hastening the collapse of their rule in Eastern Europe. I knew the Soviet authorities had no intention of killing the Catholic Pope, but someone was trying to frame them, so I flew to Warsaw once more and begun my investigation. I visited every church in Poland, talking to any priest I could find. Finally, I met with an old priest who told me a crazy Bulgarian woman had confessed to him about her husband and said he was going to kill the Pope. I knew the woman was not insane at all, so I instantly alerted the police of a possible assassination attempt and told them to look for a person of Bulgarian origin. One hour later, after an extensive manhunt, the Bulgarian man was arrested. He was in the possession of a file containing the plans of the Pope's route through Poland's most holy city Czestochowa.

After the Polish security officials arrested the would-be assassin was arrested, I returned to the United States, glad that once more, I was able to prevent my country from being framed for an assassination attempt. However, many senior official in the American military intelligence continued to say that Moscow was evil, and would try to kill the Pope and assassinate other leaders. I realized that they thought Russians were evil, but I also wanted to understand the causes of Russophobia in the minds of ordinary American

politicians. I wished I knew why there was such fear and hatred of Russians, and why this phenomenon comprised of intersecting forms of racism, racialization, xenophobia. There was no doubt that this intersectional formulation against anyone who had Russian ethnicity was activated by certain media bodies and were read by the public as worthy of acceptance. All Russians were considered either exceptionally aberrant, or deadly threatening to this homogenous American nation, which was considered to be ultramodern, civilized and white.

The Camp continued sending me directions and soon, I found myself embroiled in the most deadly game of espionage. I had since lost contact with the Russian woman and her husband. I knew they had moved to New Jersey but was still childless.

Occasionally, on weekends, I would drive to New Jersey to get a glimpse of the couple that reminded me of my own dream parents. The Russian woman was still childless. The two adopted adolescents who had been living with her were sharing home with their biological father and this woman. I later learned that the children's mother was institutionalized in a psychiatric ward and they had no relatives to look after them. Once again, I marveled at their luck to have been taken under the wings of this kind hearted Russian woman who looked nearly identical to my own dear mother.

In was in the course of this lifestyle that I met Cynthia. She was the daughter of NSA's black ops director, a bald and graceful elderly man who had agreed to help me. In exchange for my immunity, all I had to do was supply the United States government with the names of all the members of the Camp and assist in their capture. Then I would be free. With new identities, I would be able to travel anywhere in the world. It was a tempting offer. There was a great risk involved but I was prepared to fight for freedom.

I regularly met with Richard and dived headlong into the life of a double agent and began to dismantle the organization that had trained me. Richard invited me to his house each week, and I always arrived on time at Richard's home.

After the first knock, the door swung wide open. I stepped back in shock, because I did not recognize the young man who opened the door. I thought I was in the wrong address, or that it was the wrong house, because the person who opened the door was a young man, in his early twenties, but he was not wearing any clothes, aside from a small red underwear. I asked him politely if this was Richard's house, and the man nodded happily, saying Richard was in the living room waiting for me. I was confused about who the man was and I asked. He said he was the doorman, and works as a private employee in this property. I knew Americans were very interested in costume parties so I asked the naked doorman if Richard had instructions for guests to dress in certain Halloween type outfits, but the man laughed and said he and all other male employees in Richard's house had orders to wear red underwear while they were on duty. Everyone, including the doorman, had specific orders to work indoors without any clothing. I nodded and went inside. But I did not give the incident much thought, because Cynthia was my life, and my world revolved around her. I did not want to cause inconvenience to Richard's life or make him feel uncomfortable by questioning his behavior with his employees, because he had always treated me very kindly. Since my arrival in the United States, he was my guiding star, who taught me how to survive, and supplied me with weapons, money and most importantly a home. Richard was exceptionally generous to invite me for weekly dinner events with Cynthia and himself. I was grateful to him, despite many of the small issues I faced. I was grateful mainly due to my Russian heritage. One thing everyone must know is that Russians are very grateful, and the smallest help is remembered and reciprocated. I was grateful to Richard for inviting me to his home like a respectable human being. It felt good to be treated with honor and civility.

My relationship with Cynthia improved slightly although I felt guilty about pulling her away from her father. I could see that he loved her and wanted to be close to her, but I also began to get frustrated with his clinginess. He always insisted that Cynthia dine with him. In family parties, he would want to dance with Cynthia all night. I was embroiled in a tug war. I loved Cynthia but it was obvious that her father wanted her to know he loved her more.

Our romantic encounters became more frequent, and occasionally, Cynthia would get caught trying to sneak into my car at night. She told me that Richard had been very angry at her for dating me, and he had ordered her to break up with me. However, Cynthia did not agree, and we continued to get together in the car at night and offer each other love.

Cynthia and I met early in 1978. We had a wonderful relationship, and she was living with her father, while I remained in a studio near the apartment building of the kind-faced Russian woman. The neighborhood I lived in was a little strange, and the population consisted of mostly Iranian and Afghan migrants who had come to the New York as tourists or refugees. The Russian woman and her husband were busy with their personal lives, and often went to vacation to Egypt and Iraq. I was content with my lifestyle, until the beginning of the new year. Less than one year after our affair began, the United States was embroiled in a crisis that was brewing half a world away.

It was the Iranian hostage crisis, that had followed a bitter and bloody revolution in that nation. People in America began to hate Iranians and hate crimes against Moslems increased. The media was abuzz with stories about how the American consulate in Tehran was hijacked by religious zealots. The diplomatic crisis continued from 1979 to 1981, and even though the U.S. government tried to send choppers to rescue the fifty Americans who were being held as hostages by the Iranian Revolutionary students, but the helicopter crashed, and was unable to rescue anyone.

The attack on the American embassy in Iran was ultimately unsuccessful, and although Cynthia's stepfather tried his best to start a war between Iran and the United States, he was not able to convince the U.S. Senate to invade that country.

However, Richard did not stop trying to destabilize the Middle East.

His next target was Iraq.

Richard personally paid billions of dollars to the Iraqi leader and ordered him to invade neighboring Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. He also ordered the President of Iraq to declare war on Iran. During this time, Richard mistakenly thought that I had relations or family in Iran, so he was determined to destroy that country. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards were fighting against the Iraqi dictator, but Richard supplied him with arms and ammunitions and ordered him to use the Iraqi army to invade the remaining Middle Eastern countries.

During this time, Richard hired a group of ex-Moslem mercenaries in Afghanistan, and paid them to start an uprising. This caused the Soviet leaders to send in troops to Afghanistan and squash the rebellion. However, some of the Russian leaders refused to get involved in the war and rejected Richard's offer of war with Afghanistan. However, Richard immediately had three Russian presidents killed, including both presidents Danilov and Shcherbakov assassinated with poison within the span of one year, and he finally replaced the Russian leader with one of his own agents. He wanted to control the Soviet Union with his own puppet government so that they would not be able to interfere in his plans of starting wars in the Middle East, Egypt and Iran.

Meanwhile, Richard and his Italian employee created a powerful mercenary group in Afghanistan called the Taliban and supplied them with ammunitions to kill the Soviet troops. Ultimately, that war ended when the Russian president decided to withdraw. But Richard continued to use the Taliban group as his base of operation for many years, and continued to order them to claim responsibility for any crimes that he or his mercenary group carried out, such as the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City. Richard's most trusted agents took over the leadership of the Taliban group and they began to dress as Afghans and carried out many war crimes, and used advanced technology and weapons to kill the Soviet troops. Richard and his Italian employees also ordered those ex-Moslem agents in the Taliban to torture and behead women and children and act like an Islamist group.

Similar to the Taliban group in Afghanistan, Richard began to fund a group in Lebanon called the Hisbulla, and the mercenaries who worked there were ordered to begin a civil war in Lebanon. This caused many skirmishes in that country and eventually several thousand Moslems were killed by Christian Lebanese men. And Hisbulla became more powerful with the backing of Richard's NSA rogue operatives, and Richard planned to use the group to launch small missile strikes into Israel so that Tel Aviv could retaliate and destroy both Iran and Lebanon completely.

Cynthia's stepfather was eager to destroy the Soviet Union so he killed three presidents in three years, and finally rigged the election to bring President Belstin to power, even though Belstin was not popular and he did not receive the majority vote.

Richard ordered president Belstin to invade Chechnya and wipe out every last member of the ethnic Russian Moslem population. He knew my mother was from Grozny, so he wanted to wipe that city off the map. In order to encourage Russian troops to kill Chechens, Richard framed Caucasian Moslems for many terrorist attacks in Russia, and this was used as an excuse by the Russian government to invade and bomb Chechnya. Richard told Belstin to kill at least one million Chechens and the Russian leader agreed to kill hundred thousand people and injure another quarter million.

It was in those massive air raids and bombings that my mother's entire family passed away. Even the small children perished in those missile strikes.

When the bombing subsided, I hurried to visit the small village in which my mom was buried. I stood in front of the family graveyard, and saw that the cemetery was in ruins. The headstones were crushed under the weight of the bombs and my dear mother's resting place was defaced.

I wept in agony and despair to see the most beloved place in the world destroyed.

I collapsed to my knees over the burial place of my mother, and cried like a child. "Oh, Mamushka!" I whispered in agony. "Why did I not die? Why didn't you kill me when I was a child? Look at how accursed your son is. Look at him! He is the reason for all the destruction in the world. Look at him! If your son was brave enough, he would have killed himself to save the world, but he is too coward. He is too afraid for his adopted family's safety, and he is afraid to die and leave them to get tortured by the most vile man living on earth. Why did you bring me to this world, mama? Why did you bring the most horrible man in the world? Why did you give birth to

the most accursed boy in the universe? I'm sorry, mama, I have no one to cry to. Your family members, my uncles, grandparents. Everyone died for me. I'm cursed. I am hated. Oh, how I destroy everyone who loves me. I destroy all those I love. I couldn't save them, mama. I couldn't help or save any one of them here." I wailed in agony, but there was no reply. The graveyard was silent. So I continued to speak.

"Look at me, mama! Look at what I did! Look what I did to you! I destroyed your life! I destroyed your happiness. I destroyed your whole family. Look at me, sitting here! I am going to go crazy. I am going to burn myself to death. I deserve torture and pain because I am cursed. These beautiful people don't deserve to suffer and die. Only I deserve to suffer and die." Uttering these words, I wept non-stop for twenty hours and after almost one entire day, I collapsed and fainted near my mother's grave.

I wept so much that I had to vomit, and after several hours of crying, I decided to kill myself. I hated everyone, and I hated myself for being the cause of all this destruction. I knew suicide was wrong, but I didn't care if God hated me. I just could not stay alive for one more minute. There was no one in this world more accursed than myself. If Richard wanted to kill me so desperately, then I will save him the trouble and kill myself. I will make it easier for him.

I took out my gun and was about to shoot myself, when I remembered several bank account information I had. Those were charity accounts in which each month, I sent money to the Russian orphanages where I grew up in. I did not want those children to starve, so I called my dear friend Dustin, and told him all the details about those bank accounts. I asked him to make sure to send money to several Russian orphanages each month. Dustin asked me why I was giving him this information so I told him that in case I die, I wanted him to continue those charity missions.

I do not know how Dustin realized that I had planned to kill myself, but minutes after I hung up the phone, I received a call from an old friend who worked in the United States Air Force. His name was Owen Chamberlain. He worked together with me in Bosnia and we were able to stop several nuclear weapons from detonating. When I answered the phone, he spoke sharply, and said I must never think of killing myself.

"You don't understand the pain I am going through, Owen," I said.

Owen Chamberlain answered instantly. "No matter what you are going through, you must stay alive. You have to live and take care of your family."

"Why?"

"Because we both know that Richard is after your adopted family in New York, and he won't stop hurting and torturing them, no matter what you do. You must protect them."

I answered. "But Owen, if I am dead, Cynthia's stepfather will stop harassing my family."

The Air Force man retorted angrily. "No, Richard is not so honorable, He will never let your family have peace. Did he let your deceased mother rest in peace? No, he did not. His vengeance is so powerful that he will never let your adopted mother live in peace either. They are your family now, and it is your duty and responsibility to make sure they are safe."

"I can't," I whispered in anguish.

"It is a trust from God, and you must protect them, and you have to stay alive for that. Oh, and just now, I got a message from your mother's hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Yes, she just gave birth to a little girl, and guess what?" Owen Chamberlain replied. "The hospital is already surrounded by Richard's assassins and kidnappers."

"Why are they at the hospital?" I asked worriedly.

"Richard ordered his men to kidnap the baby girl. If you die now, the baby girl will suffer, and it will all be your fault."

When Owen told me this news, I was sick with worry. I wailed loudly, because now I realized that I cannot even die in peace. I knew I had to stay alive to protect my adopted family. I was angry at God for not giving me the permission to die. Oh, how lucky were those people who had the luxury to die. Oh, how lucky are those people who die and end their misery! How fortunate are they who are not cursed to live and see their loved ones suffer and cannot leave the world? What kind of hell do I live in? I do not even have the right to leave it. Even death is too much a relief for me?

I was still bewailing my sad fate, when Dustin tracked my location and sent a Russian rescue team to escort me away from the graveyard in Grozny.

I remembered what my dear friend Owen had said. The young and beautiful Russian woman had given birth to a child. I had to protect that family as well.

I returned to the United States, and went directly to the hospital to see if the newborn girl was doing alright. The mother and child had already checked out from the maternity ward, so I went to her house and knocked. There was no sign of the infant!

I became so frantic, that I could not even think clearly. Where was the baby? Where should I look first? I could not think! I had no capacity to reason anymore. I was paralyzed with sadness and mad fear. It was a hot dry afternoon, and the air was full of pollen and dust. Cold sweat trickled down my ribs and broke out on my forehead. I gazed into the cloudless sky, witnessing a wisp of cloud dissolve in front of the blazing sun and I knew that there must be a God up there who had the power to protect the little girl. He had more knowledge and might than the dirty-minded kidnappers, who did not even seek to spare even a little infant from unspeakable abuse.

This was the third time the little infant girl was kidnapped from her own home. I looked into the house and saw the window to the sitting room was wide open, and the Russian woman was asleep on the couch. She was oblivious to the fact that her baby girl was just snatched away by the vilest creatures that ever lived. The young mother did not have a clue what those men had planned to do with her baby.

Such venomous threats were too much for my soul to bear. Why had they targeted the young child? Someone was trying to punish me by tapping into my weakness. They must have seen me frequenting this house. And now, this innocent family came under attack!

For me!

I searched for hours, running like a madman, racing from one road to the next, showing every single passerby on the streets a recent photo of the baby. Has anyone seen her? All I received as answers were shaken heads, and empty glances. Some pedestrians did not even bother to reply to me. Undoubtedly, they thought I was a crazy father who was foolish enough to lose his child. How could I not know where the baby was? Oh, God, where had the kidnappers taken the child? Was she safe? Have they hurt her?

Such thoughts swamped my mind completely. I was drowning in sorrow, knee deep in tears, as my audible words of prayers became more and more slurred. I could not see very clearly, possibly from the broken blood vessels of my tired eyes. Tense veins cried in pain as each of my limbs seemed to weigh a thousand kilograms. I was maddened with a renewed terror, imagining the worst may happen to the Russian woman's baby. What was happening to my life? Why was an innocent family being used as a target? With renewed despair, I thought I was forgetting my own identity, and losing the trail of who I was, and was somehow turning in circles, like a wounded foxhound in the middle of an abandoned forest.

I continued to race from door to door, searching each house in the block. Then two roads behind the Russian woman's house, I heard a loud echo of a child wailing. I recognized that sound! It was the girl who was kidnapped. She had an uncanny habit of crying unusually loudly, much to the annoyance of her parents, who spent their nights sleepless on the account of her shrieks, but at this moment, I felt my heart flood with relief, and I sank to my knees in thanks to the God who allowed this baby girl to cry out at the right moment. I followed the echoes of her cries and came to a halt outside a two-story wooden-paneled house. The front door was locked, so I went around the house and peered in through the window. The little baby was lying on the floor, wrapped in her own blanket, but there was no one in the room.

She was alone! And unharmed!

When I first witnessed the child laying on the ground, torrents of tears rolled down my cheek. In spite of the recent tragedy, my tears were a welcome respite and proved to be a kind relief to my agonized heart. At least, I had located the baby. Getting her out of this kidnapper's den would be my next task. I jumped to the window, and carefully slipped in and landed softly on the floor.

The child saw this movement and momentarily ceased crying. I hastily wrapped her blanket tightly around the tiny body and scooped her into my arm. But the small window was too narrow for the child to slide through. If I dropped her from this height, she would be injured. I had no choice. I had to leave using the doors. I tiptoed to the door and pressed my ears against the wood. Sharp and heated conversation was going on between several people. I cracked the door open one inch and peeked out. Three men and a woman were arguing over how much money each one of them should receive. They were talking about receiving a down payment as soon they handed the baby over to child traffickers. The older man was angry, and said he will only pay them cash after the child had been sold into sex-slavery.

The blood in my heart froze when I heard this. Were they really planning to sell this baby girl to child-traffickers? Why would someone want to do that?! Fear flooded my brain, and I subconsciously clutched the dear child to my chest, resolving never to allow those evil men and women to come near her. But my grip disturbed the baby and she began to cry out again. This time, the quarrelling men outside the door heard the child, and they suddenly noticed that I was watching them, and they ran over to me with guns drawn. I jumped back into the room and slammed the door, placing my weight against it to prevent them from entering. One of them fired directly into the knob, but the others stopped him.

They mentioned that they would not get paid if the baby girl was dead. Then they began to kick the door ferociously. I knew I could not hold them off for too long, so I placed the girl near the window and tried to climb out, but it was too late. They broke down the

door and barged in. I quickly lifted the child in my arms and tried to shield her little body from their sight. The woman brandished a knife at me, ordering me to hand over the girl, but I refused. They surrounded me, and I kept backing against the wall. I tried to remain brave but I knew I was trapped. There was no way out. These men would kill me and steal the child away, and sell her into a trafficking ring. I could never let that happen! I was prepared to die and save the baby, but the terrible thought of what they would do to her after I was dead scared me so helplessly that my heart stopped beating momentarily.

The room was quiet except for the bellowing of the little infant. I rocked her instinctively in my arms, and the baby looked at me with those large brown bubbly eyes. No, I could never let them take her! I was prepared to kill all four of the kidnappers with my bare hand rather than let them touch the baby girl. I stood defiantly facing them, my arms protectively wrapped around the little infant, knowing it would probably be the last moment of my life. Then I heard the police siren. Loud wails of the local law enforcement vehicles commanded all occupants to come out with hands in the air.

My face broke into smile of relief. My friends at the police department must have followed me here, and now I could rest, knowing the child would be safe. Once the kidnapper had surrendered to the police, I carried the baby to the police car and handed her to a female officer. Once everyone had left, and I knew the child was safe, I cried freely, wiping away the grimy tears with my arm.

When I got home that evening, I forced myself to cease the torrents of tears and lamentations. There was too much horror going on in my life, and the pain was too much for a young man like me. After several years, my tears had dried up. I was inured to everything that can touch the human spirit and most things that can touch the body.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, Richard told the president to invade Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and after the dictator listened to him, Richard told him to invade Qatar, Yemen and Bahrain. However, the Iraqi president was worried about losing the war completely, so he refused Richard's order.

By 1990, Richard became furious with the Iraqi leader and went to the American congress and told them to invade and attack Iraq. The next year, Richard made the NATO and United Nations put sanctions on Iraq for stopping war in Middle East.

He also brought Belstin to power in Russia and ordered him to rule the nation with an iron fist.

The Kashmir Dilemma in 1991:

It was early in the year 1991, and just around the time the KGB's First Chief Directorate was succeeded by the Foreign Intelligence Service. Many of my colleagues began to work in the new SVR, which was merely an extension of their previous jobs and I met with them to reminisce about our past missions. Richard had loaned me some money for my day-to-day needs and after saving my wages for two years, I was able to purchase my first real estate that year. It was an *odnushka* in the capital and the one-room apartment on Kantemirovskaya Street in Moscow cost me roughly ten million rubles.

My primary residence was still in and around New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. On weekdays, I shared a ride with Richard while accompanying him to the Virginia bureau of the NSA black budget division.

The Russian woman who lived adjacent to my building in New York City had gone to India to visit her husband's relatives. I thought it would be a superb opportunity for me to see the rich green meadows and seas of golden grain fields in the Indian subcontinent, so I joined them in the family journey.

The Russian woman's husband had over a hundred relatives within the Indian subcontinent, which included dozens of cousins, uncles and great aunts in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Kashmir.

When I first lay foot over the mountainous terrain of Kashmir, I was mesmerized by the beauty of the small semi-autonomous state. A small drive in a shared bus showed me the numerous deep valleys and high plateaus of the region. The fertile and rich soil of Kashmir produced rare spices like saffron, and it was there I tasted some of the finest dry fruits like almonds and walnuts. I spent nearly five days exploring this beautiful countryside of the Northern Province of India before traveling to other parts of India. I spent two delightful days attending a luxurious wedding reception. It was taking place in the honor of one of the nieces of this family. It was during this wedding party that I noticed a man following me. I recognized him because I saw him earlier, when I was sightseeing in Kashmir. I decided to confirm if the man was in fact chasing me, so I abruptly left the wedding celebrations and took a sharp turn into an alley. The man raced in after me. But I hid in the shadows on a store entrance, and grabbed him from behind. His eyes rolled back in panic when he saw me, as he begged me not to hurt him. Upon questioning him, he admitted that Richard had sent him to India to follow me and report back to him about my whereabouts and activities.

I logged my name on the next flight back to the United States. The transcontinental flight was uneventful as I mulled over what I should tell Richard. I wanted to make it clear that I deserved some privacy. I did not want him or anyone else to know about my private life, or follow this young couple and their children in India. In this work, I knew how dangerous family and loved ones could become so

I wished no one found out about the Russian woman, and her Indian husband. They were a peaceful and happy family, and did not deserve to have this happiness ruined by undercover agents prowling inside their private celebrations.

Upon landing in America, I asked Richard if he would be able to meet me, and as was his habit, Richard invited me to his house to discuss my concerns over dinner. I was eager to help restore peace in the beautiful region, especially because I had made many great friends while visiting Kashmir. I arrived early and Richard ushered me inside his house. One of the first things I noticed was the collection of paintings hanging from the wall. There were numerous oil paintings dating back to the Renaissance, and I recognized several art pieces because I had procured them for him. Then I saw a familiar painting hanging from the wall of his living room area. I recognized it at once because Richard had a similar looking painting in each of his mansions. The inscription read that it was a painting of Pieter Van Mol and it also showed a daughter breastfeeding a scantily clothed father. Richard had additional paintings of this kind done by Hans Sebald Beham and Rembrandt Peale in his library, and adorning the walls of the mansion's lobby. I was shaken by those images but decided not to question him about it, lest he feel I am accosting him. I was still slightly perturbed by the vulgar paintings Richard had hung from the wall, and almost forgot to mention the operative he had sent to follow me in India. When I confronted him, Richard did not deny it. He merely insisted that it was for my own protection. He said the NSA operative was in India merely to ensure I was safe from any harm. I begged Richard to allow me some privacy and not to follow me when I was not conducting active missions for the black ops division. Richard agreed and apologized again before bidding me good night.

One week after I had this conversation with Richard, I read the headlines of several newspapers that were displayed on a roadside stall. A severe riot had broken out in the Northern Province of India. Brutal genocide and ethnic cleansing were taking place in Kashmir! I could not believe my eyes. I had just returned from Kashmir a week ago. How could this happen? How could a dazzling country with such natural beauty and scenic landscapes become the target of violent turmoil and mass killings? Ethnic factions were fighting with one another, and independent journalists reported that Muslims residents were being barbarically murdered and butchered by the local Hindus. This in turn caused a spate of revenge killings.

I later discovered that there were several groups of mercenaries that had been adding fuel to the Hindu-Muslim chasm in the Kashmir region by hiring locals to attack opposing parties. Mercenaries dressed as fake clerics called for genocide, and used the Friday prayer's pulpit to spread false rumors about the Hindu residents. In Hindu temples, free-lance foreign mercenaries posed as dervishes, gurus and pandits and called upon Hindus to kill all the Muslims in Kashmir. The false news about an ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing gave rise to anger and confusion. The Hindu minorities found themselves in a myriad circumstance.

I had only been in America for one year, and during this time, aside from the GRU operatives who accompanied me as my official guardian, there was no familiar faces around. I found solace, however, in the life of a beautiful family who lived a short distance away from one of the offices I worked in. It was the couple who I had encountered shortly after landing in the United States.

The Russian woman lived in the seventh floor of the eight-story brick building in the Bronx borough of New York City. The neighborhood was crowded and store fronts of delis and boutiques were often vandalized by street urchins or vagrants, so I often went to the couple's house to make sure they were safe.

The Russian woman was still in college, studying laboriously for medical school and well on her way to become a doctor, while her South East Asian husband was completing his dissertation for a PhD in laser physics. I was impressed by their zeal for acquiring education as well as their hard work. For a brief period, the famous sayings really seemed true when immigrants arriving at New York's harbor claimed America was a land where everyone could fulfill their dreams.

Each morning, the couple would leave their small studio apartment together and take a subway train to their respective university classes, while the woman remained in the medical school hospital until past midnight to work at a night shift in the critical section of the facility. The narrow alleys beside the subways could be dangerous for a beautiful young woman like her, but I was glad to see that a police car would often escort her home directly from her job at the hospital. I once waved at the policeman who was driving the vehicle and asked him why the Russian woman was being dropped off from a police vehicle. The officer frowned and reported that the young woman was harassed by numerous men who were waiting for her outside her hospital. Some tried to follow her to the train tracks and attack her. At another location, the woman was chased by two cars, and she had to run in the opposite lane to get away from the predator and returned to the hospital. The head nurse called for police protection and since then, they escorted her to, and from, the hospital.

I was relieved that the woman would be safe, so I returned to work. The next morning, I arrived early to see if the young woman was safely home, but something appeared terribly odd about the building. The windows of the seventh floor were smashed. My heart raced in apprehension. I was terribly worried thinking something may have happened to the Russian woman or her husband. Two police cars were parked at the end of the road. The overhead warning lights were flashing sporadically. An elderly woman was weeping silently, shuffling back and forth the entrance way. I cautiously approached her and asked what had happened in this house. She said she

lived next door, but heard some rackets and saw around fifty armed gangsters vandalize the building, looting every apartment and assaulting the residents. With tears overflowing her eyes, the old woman said that no one was spared, and even her seventy-nine-year-old friend who lived in the seventh floor was brutally raped by those criminals. From a distance, I saw policemen recording statements from the victims, so I spoke to them, trying to find out the motive of those attackers. I was horrified to learn that all women residents in the building were assaulted that night. My thoughts rushed to the Russian woman and I raced up the stairs and saw that her house was in complete disarray. Time appeared to slow down as I lowered my head, fearing that the worst had happened. The world felt suspended for a few moments as I searched her apartment.

All the walls were caved in, the windows broken but it was deserted. The Russian woman was not home.

Outside, I recognized another elderly resident of the building. He said the Russian woman and her husband was not home that night, as she was in her night duty at work. I closed my eyes in relief and uttered a silent prayer of gratitude to see that the beautiful couple was not molested by the horrible criminals. I had loved the Russian woman very much and the thought of her getting hurt was unbearable for me.

The next day, she and her husband moved into an adjacent residential house and settled comfortably in their new room. I assisted them with the move, carrying heavy items like the tapestries and settees to the new house, which they shared with another elderly woman. The Russian woman was very beautiful and I was concerned for her safety, so I placed several invisible layers of security at the main gate, which used a laser beam to set off an alarm system.

Eleven days later, I received an alarm sign on my phone! The Russian woman's security system was activated! This could only mean that someone had broken in the residence. I jumped into a taxi and ordered the driver to race to that house. When I arrived, the door was wide open and I saw the young woman crouching on the floor, shedding bitter tears. I thought she was hurt but then I saw a body lying on the middle of the carpeted living-room floor. It was landlady who had offered her room for rent! The old woman was dead. I quickly examined her frail body, and saw her clothing were all ripped. She had been brutally beaten and sexually assaulted! I could not believe my eyes! What was happening? I asked the Russian woman what happened, and tearfully, she sobbed that she had just arrived from work and found the old lady in this state. I inspected the rest of the house, and the room in which the couple was living was totally ransacked. This time, I began to suspect that the real target was this young Russian woman. Someone had been targeting her. It was unusual for so many cars to chase her every day on her way to work. I knew I had to protect her so I immediately told the young lady to move out of this area, and I personally placed her in the back of the taxi and began to drive her out of the State.

As soon as I eased into the inter-state highway, I noticed several jeeps flanking me. I told the Russian woman to keep her head down and tried to increase speed, but the jeep with blackened windows blocked my path. Then I saw a small object hitting my windshield. The thing exploded, shattering my steering-wheel. I slammed the brakes to prevent a collision. Within a moment, the taxi was encircled and masked men grabbed the Russian woman from the back seat and dragged her into the jeep. One of them also yanked me out the window and struck me viciously on my head. I dropped to the ground and everything went dark.

When I regained consciousness, I found myself shackled to the wall, held firm by a sharp wire, and forced to remain halfway between kneeling and standing for several days. I was only semiconscious, but even in this state, I prayed for the safety of the Russian woman and hoped the captors would all die before they could touch her. I wanted to shout aloud and tell God to keep her safe, but then I noticed my mouth was aching. A dirty piece of cloth was stuffed in my mouth to prevent me from screaming for help.

I waited in silence, hoping to hear or see any clue that would identify my whereabouts, but the dark cell was inconspicuous. Then I heard a blood-curdling scream. I recognized the voice! It was the young Russian woman who was kidnapped along with me. I struggled fiercely against my chains, but it was futile. The cries became louder, and finally the door to my cell opened. One of the men held a pair of keys. He leered at me and said they had orders to make me a witness to what they were going to do to the woman.

I was confused and afraid about what they meant, but soon, they removed the chain and dragged me across a long hall and into a room. There were nearly eighty men, with horrible body tattoos and piercings. Many of them carried machine guns. They all stood around a small figure in the center of the room. It was the beautiful Russian woman! My heart raced and I found myself collapsing in unearthly fear! Oh, God! Save her! I squeezed my eyes shut to prevent tears from spilling out, as I cried and cried in silence, trying not to show signs of emotion on my face, because I did not want the criminals to think I knew the woman very well.

Then one of the older men crouched next to me, ordering me to open my eyes. He said he received orders that Russian woman must be sexually assaulted by all these men in my presence. The man also warned me if I did not agree to open my eyes, they would use a adhesive material to tape my eyelids apart, forcing me to watch their dirty deed.

For a split second, I opened my eyes to check if the young lady was alive. The woman was not moving. I assumed she had fainted from fright, so I shut my eyes, refusing to watch them assault her. I guessed that since it was their job to make sure I witnessed her humiliation, if I kept my eyes closed, they would not hurt her. But three men grabbed my face, trying to pry my eyes open, but I fought

like a crazed person. My jaws were about to burst from this effort and I tried to bite the hand of one of the men, but he leaped out of range, and my teeth sank into my own lip, causing hot blood to trickle down my chin. They grabbed my body before firmly tying it down next to the young woman. One of them pinched my eyelids to keep it open, but I wanted to die rather than see this beautiful woman get abused, so I momentarily stopped struggling. They thought I had given up, and were now moving towards the woman, when I started to beat my head against the tiled floor, fighting for a quick death. I knew if I was dead, this woman would no longer be a target.

Somehow, these criminals had orders to punish me, and they assumed she was important to me.

I banged my head again on the floor, and the blow momentarily dazed me, almost to the point of dizziness. My neck wobbled unsteadily as I prepared to drop my forehead to the ground one more time, and end my life. Just that moment, I heard a gunshot. A tall man burst into the room, brandishing a handgun. He fired at the ceiling once more, and the men who were about to assault the Russian woman backed away, cowering against the wall.

In a thundering voice, he ordered them not to touch the woman. One of the criminals let out a laugh and grabbed the woman's long hair, and the tall man immediately shot him dead. Relief flooded my mind. I knew it was a miracle. God had understood my desperate entreaties and he had answered my prayers by sending this tall man to save the Russian woman from ultimate humiliation.

I don't know what happened after that, because my head became very weak from the powerful blows I inflicted on it. When I awoke, I was inside a small room, which looked like a service closet. I was wrapped in some type of rope, so I began to tug and pull at my ankle bonds, but they were bound tightly. Finally, despite the pain from my swollen arms and fingers, I managed to wriggle my wrists free. With my left hand free, I took only a few minutes to rip off my gag, then lay for several moments on the floor, whooping in great gulps of air. The smell in the small closet was appalling, a mixture of blood, vomit, and whisky. I unpicked the knots on my right wrist, wincing as the pain from the bloodied finger shot up my arm, then gradually I undid the bonding from my feet.

Free from the ropes, I crawled out of the narrow door way. The place was deserted.

I raced across the corridors, and overheard loud voices inside. Opening the door a few centimeters, I peered inside. The tall man was there, engrossed in a heated conversation with several aggressive-looking tattooed men. I could not hear what they were arguing about, but when the man turned his head, I clearly saw his face for the first time.

It was Ludwig Hohenstein!

I recognized him from a newspaper article I read in Richard's vacation home in Austria a year ago. His name was Ludwig von Thun und Hohenstein, and he was a Viennese aristocrat, officially holding the title of a count. I met Ludwig in his family chateau on the left bank of the Eger River, after he had invited Richard to that palatial residence. Cynthia was also invited, so she insisted upon taking me there.

When I met him in Austria, I thought he behaved like a gentleman. Perhaps, that was the reason why he saved the Russian woman from being assaulted. But I still could not understand why he was a member of the team of criminals who had kidnapped me and the young woman.

But I knew my escape would be discovered soon, and there was no time to waste. I had to find the Russian woman and leave the vicinity of this criminal den. I began to search anxiously. Finally, I saw a small shed that was locked with several layers of chains. I knew the door would be bolted only if there was someone locked inside, so I ran to the heavy door, and used my nail clipper to unlock the dead bolt. In one minute, the door was open, and a frightened cry rose from a corner. I gestured for the young woman to remain silent and promised to get her to safety. She was too weak to move, so I carried her to one of the jeeps belonging to the criminals and hastily drove away.

I left the woman at an emergency room of a local hospital and returned to my own residence, thoroughly exhausted from the ordeal that had taken place. Fear made me paralyzed. All I could think about was what would happen to the beautiful Russian woman?

Terrible thoughts encroached my mind, and I suffered from unending bouts of nightmares. What if I was unable to rescue her? What would happen if the Viennese count did not stop his men from assaulting the Russian woman? Would they have killed her? To think she might get killed reduced me into passionate tears. After crying all night in agony, my voice no longer resembled a human being. I sounded like a wounded dog who had been hit by a train and was left remaining crippled overnight on the street. With so many enemies, lurking unseen in every corner, and with hundreds of unnamed and unknown culprits waiting to pounce on those I loved, I wanted desperately to vanish from the accursed city life. I wished I could run back to the vast forests in Siberia where my training Camp was located, and get lost amidst the untamed beasts of the jungle, for it seemed much safer to be around animals rather than criminals who had a human body, but mind of a monster. I felt I would be much happier with the foxes and the hounds of my homeland, than live among the civilized men of the United States. I felt helpless, for I knew nothing I could do was enough to protect the young woman from these beastly men.

In spite of all the attacks this woman was facing, I allowed myself to entertain a brief glimmer of hope in my heart. I hoped, and prayed

that the tall aristocratic man would protect her. Ludwig von Thun und Hohenstein was an honorable man, and he certainly would not allow the chaste Russian woman to be defiled and disgraced.

For the next ten years, I lived in a state of constant fear, and countless times, I had to call the police and other emergency services in order to keep the Russian woman safe. Following my advice, she and her family moved into different houses each year, even travelling to London and staying in Bradford for three years. However, ten months after moving to England, unidentified assailants once more attacked her house, but fortunately I had been there and was able to prevent her from being kidnapped. I never understood why so many people were constantly trying to attack, kidnap and assault the young Russian woman, but I eventually found out. It was after I had captured one of the men who broke into her house through a basement window. I questioned the kidnapper and he admitted that his orders were to kidnap and sexually assault the woman. Later, I released him to see where his employers were. The man walked into an abandoned steel factory and met with a familiar-looking man. He was the Austrian nobleman who had saved the Russian woman several years ago. I immediately ambushed them and held the Count at gunpoint, and demanded an explanation.

Ludwig von Thun und Hohenstein looked frightened to see the gun in my hand, but he begged me to let him go. He explained that Richard was his friend and trusted him with the job of kidnapping this Russian woman. I froze. Richard had ordered this attack on the woman who was almost like a mother to me? The Austrian man hesitatingly nodded. Richard had asked him to commandeer this mission of kidnapping and assaulting this woman because he thought it would cause me immense heartache and would devastate me to the point of delirium, and I would as a result, abandon Cynthia and seek love elsewhere. I asked Ludwig why he agreed to help Richard do such a heinous crime, and the nobleman told me he was only staying in this position to prevent the criminals from harming the innocent young woman.

Ludwig von Thun und Hohenstein was my enemy, but I somehow believed him, even though he was an old acquaintance of Richard. I allowed him to leave unharmed, and began my preparation for bringing the couple back to the United States. England would not be safe anymore.

When I was heading to Battersea and began to cross the Chelsea Bridge, a car rammed me, and then after I swerved to avoid collision, the vehicle once more hit me, nearly pushing my car overboard.

"No!" I cried sharply as the vehicle lost control, and careened around the narrow path just as I slammed on my brakes. But it was too late. The car hit forcefully at the bridge's rails.

I was getting knocked off the bridge, and just before plunging headfirst into the icy water, I caught sight of the driver of the vehicle that rammed into me. It was the Austrian Count Ludwig!

Why was he trying to kill me? I just met him at the steel factory!

But I was not capable of further coherent thoughts, as my car sank into the bottom of the river, and icy water seeped in through the window. I kicked the door open and swam out of the sinking car, kicking my way to the surface, floating breathlessly in the freezing water.

British police rescued me from the water and gave me warm beverages and blankets. As soon as I was warm enough, I hailed a cab and went directly to the steel factory to look for the Austrian man. I wanted to ask him why he tried to kill me. However, when I got there, he was lying on the ground, a deep gash on his forehead. I shook him gently by the shoulder, and he stirred awake. When he saw me, he screamed and tried to run. I asked Ludwig what had happened, and why he was so afraid of me. The Austrian nobleman said I had tried to kill him with a metal hammer, and struck him on the forehead. I vehemently denied hurting him, but Ludwig was convinced. He said he saw me hit him. Then I told him that a man resembling him had chased me over the Chelsea Bridge, knocking my car over the bridge, nearly killing me.

Ludwig von Thun und Hohenstein gasped. His eyes widened in surprise and in his guttural European accent, he told me that he never tried to kill me. "Don't lie!" I cried angrily, not knowing if man was speaking the truth. He broke into a torrent of apology, switching to his native language, "*Ich spreche Englisch mit genauso einem lustigen Akzent!*" I knew he was saying that his English accent was strange, but I understood that the man was innocent. Someone had seen us speaking and decided to make us enemies, by hitting him posing as me, and then trying to kill me using a man with a remarkable resemblance to the Austrian count.

It was only after four years that Ludwig von Thun und Hohenstein met with me secretly to inform me that the man who had tried to kill me over the Chelsea Bridge in London was hired directly by Richard. Apparently, Cynthia's stepfather was furious at Ludwig for helping me save the Russian woman from utter pain and humiliation.

After speaking to Ludwig, I felt a surge of renewed hope in humanity. Yes, the world was a terrible place with many violent men who were prepared to kill or maim anyone for a handful of cash. But there were also people like this Austrian nobleman, who was incidentally from the same nation Richard was originally from, and both spoke the same language, but there was a stark difference between the two men. One was hiring criminals to kidnap this beautiful Russian woman while the other was risking his life to save her

from degradation. The evil that men do doubtlessly lives on after them and the sins committed in one age must be paid for in another. I sought solace in the thought that this brief tragedy of earthly woes would pass and I would be dead, and reunited with my loved ones who preceded me. I would be in heaven with my loving mother who had died in my childhood. I would not be a trampled and insulted orphan who was being used and abused by powerful men.

A Dear End

Death is here but I cannot die,
My friends are hostages, my kindred dying,
Death has come, but I must not die,
Until my family's honor is secure and enduring.

Death is dear to me, but I cannot die,
My heart hold oceans of tears to shed,
I have tyrants and traitors to defy;
And for this, I cannot be dead!

The honor of my loved ones will shatter if I die
Danger and disgrace await them at every turn,
Oh, Death! Let me save them before I die!
Oh, let them not suffer for the sins I earned.

Have pity, oh death, delay your hastening-
For life has punished me beyond reckoning
Let not my end be in bitter suffering,
Amidst the echoes of my loved ones' wailing!

I cannot bear the echoes of their fears,
When dwelling in a cold dark tomb,
Their wailing shall haunt me for years,
If I cannot protect this kindred home.

Oh, do not torment me with their agony,
By bearing witness to their demolished dignity:
Let my family's tears not haunt me to the grave,
Oh, let me destroy my family's enemy!

Halt, oh, death! Just for a little while...
Till I have defended the bloodied hills of this land,
Till I avenged the ignominy of the hostile-
And restored honor to my family's pride!

Alas, oh, death! I must not die!
For I fear the wrath of a merciless enemy,

I must remove the pain from my kindred's sigh-
Only then will my heart know tranquility.

Have patience, oh, death! Let me linger a while,
Let me make peace with the enmity unearned:
Let me save whatever pride I had remaining,
And my beloved family's safety is ensured.

Vile men had chosen to prolong my suffering,
They do not seek an eye for an eye,
They will kill my family and their offspring,
And, so, I am not ready to die.

Wait a while, oh, death! Until my scores are settled,
And my blight-free heart can learn to survive
And the future of my family is no longer deprived-
Before I to them become more dead than alive!

Let me salvage the blood-soaked honor,
And seek clemency from the dauntless Enemy:
Cease tormenting my sisters and mother,
Do what you will with my life and me!

Oh, death! Do not hurry to seize me,
Before the tears of the ones wronged can be dried:
I am aware of this coming journey,
But I must now be at their side.

Show pity, O Death. Let my heart be at ease:
The time I need - for the watch I keep-
Over helpless ones who must live in peace-
Cannot be saved, if I am forever asleep!

Sweet Death! Halt before my bier and let me dry,
The tears of loved ones who were crucified;
The cries of my comrades have no reason or reply,
They're suffering for my sins, their hopes denied!

Await, oh death! till I have rectified
My family's honor and can be satisfied-
My departure will make these kindred cry:
Oh, then, death, how can I die?

Several months after the Russian woman gave birth to her first child, I decided to meet with a few of my former contacts in Germany and ask for their help in finding out the truth about Richard's background. I knew he had spent his youth in Vienna and Berlin, and there was no doubt that government archives had a copy of his official records somewhere.

Even though it was the middle of 1986, I could not book a direct flight to Berlin, so I stopped at Moscow and rented a small aircraft which was fueled and ready. I flew the plane over the rough terrain and suddenly noticed that I had inadvertently entered the airspace of Kazakhstan. My fuel was running low. I had to bring my plane down so I made an attempt to land at the Yubileyniy Airport, which was

only a short drive from the famed Cosmodrome. Luckily, it was a soft landing and local authorities were extremely cordial towards me. I spent less than two days in the beautiful country before they put me on a direct flight from Nur-Sultan to Berlin.

Life in Germany was not as pleasant as I had expected.

I became a target almost within a day after landing in Berlin.

Unexplained incidents started happening to me, and groups of men would attack me in the most unexpected places.

It was December of 1986, when I received word from a comrade in Kremlin who warned me that a deadly riot was taking place in the Kazakhstan and advised me not to take connecting flight to Nur-Sultan on the way back from Germany. I did not have any clue what was going on, so I telephoned one of the gentlemen who assisted me when I first made an emergency landing in the Yubileyniy Airport.

The Airport manager who had helped me explained that young ethnic Kazakhs were taking part in a mass demonstration to protest the appointment of a leader from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Protesters clashed with governmental troops and some people were killed and many more were arrested. I did not immediately find out the real reason behind the riots in Kazakhstan, but later found out that eight youth leaders were paid one million dollars each by an unnamed benefactor from the United States. Their orders were to start a revolution and overthrow the Soviet Union completely, and the anonymous sponsor also promised them ship loads of weapons if they resorted to violent protests and demonstrations. However, once the eight men were arrested, the protests against the Soviet rule died down and peace was restored.

I returned to the United States to escape these attackers but there were violent-looking burly criminals chasing me the moment I landed at Dulles International Airport. Armed mercenaries would attack me in the rest room, or when I was alone in the toilet. Bolting the doors would be useless, because they would kick the lock open. I immediately purchased a cordless electric drill driver with me at all times, and used it to lock all windows and bolt the doors of the toilet prior to entering a cubicle. I was nearly attacked several times that week. When the men began to attack me, I was shaking from head to toe in an overwhelming wave of fury. No torture of hell can ever come close to the degradation and severity of this vile abuse, but I decided never to become victim to such abuse again. I used the cut-resistant fabric to make several pairs of shorts and pants and fitted DNA coded locks at the waist. Wearing these clothes that had a reinforced skeletal structure around the groin area, made me feel much safer when walking alone in deserted streets.

When I checked into a cheap hotel to stay overnight, I even placed reinforced concrete sheet and nailed it to my bathroom door before using the shower, so that those men could not assault me. Twice, Richard sent me on covert missions to retrieve valuable items or documents of information from the other side of the Berlin Wall. Officially, I flew in via a commercial flight at Berlin Tegel Airport, and from there, I contacted Richard's old associates in the Eastern sector and cross the border discreetly. It was during one of these missions that I was again chased by hired men, who repeatedly tried to assault me.

When eight men cornered me near a filthy alley in Hohenschönhausen borough and started to kick me violently in the groin, a thin old man came rushing in, brandishing his walking stick, shouting angrily in German. I understood his words. He cursed the assaulters with the wrath of God if they hurt me. I saw his priest collar over the black coat, and I knew he was a man of God. The eight men got frightened and ran away, while the German priest helped me to my feet, and assured me that God will look save me from those criminals. Upon closer look, I recognized the man who just rescued me from peril. He was a Catholic priest in Germany who had offered me a seat on the bus. While sitting next to him, I learned that he had served under the Diocese of Limburg. I was eternally grateful to him for he saved my life when I was in great danger. The religious man escorted me to the train line, and left.

Emotionally, I was broken but did not fall apart completely until I was a several kilometers away. After hours of crying, I overcame the shock of betrayal, shame and pain of the assault, and I continued to trudge along the cobble ground, hoping to forget what had happened to me.

Even after leaving the German border, and crossing the borders of Denmark and Sweden, the troupe of hardened criminals followed me everywhere. I was not safe, even for one minute.

I was attacked several times while trying to look for a space to relieve myself, and in before entering the toilet cubicle, I checked all the other rooms to make sure no one was in it. But the next time I tried to use a public restroom, I bolted the main door of the building, and pushed a heavy metal desk in front of the doorway to prevent anyone from attacking me, and then I nailed the door in place. Finally, I entered the hot shower after several weeks of being unable to bathe, and as soon as the sharp droplets of water began raining down on me, I felt genuinely glad that I was safe for once, after so many days of trying to avoid those men. Just then, someone grabbed me from behind. He was several inches taller than me, and a much stronger man, and he tried to touch my body and assault me. I shoved with my elbow, and tried to get away from his grip but he held on to me, trying to pin me to the tiled wall. I again fought back fiercely and kicked him with all my strength. He staggered momentarily and I immediately reached for my clothes, but he took them before I could hold it, so I began to run. I ran out the shower stalls but he chased after me. Conscious of my lack of clothing, I then raced up the stair case, aiming to reach the first closet and lock myself in, but the man was faster. He grabbed my ankle and yanked me to the lower floor. I

sprained my ankle but continued to fight him, using my arm to strike his face and shoulders. The fierce struggle went on for fifteen minutes, and with my uninjured foot, I kicked him off me, and hobbled to the main door, hoping to exit and call for help. Before I could unlock the gate and remove the heavy metal table, the man thrust me forcefully and pinned me to the table. I could not move an inch, and he said he would assault me. Unable to protect myself from the sick man, I was drowning in fear and shame and finally dissolved in to tears. He hesitated for a few moments and again tried to sexually assault me, but this time, I noticed that he was older than me, perhaps in his forties. I immediately grabbed his feet in supplication, and begged him to spare me. I told him I was likely no older than his own son, and that he should not assault a young man and commit such a disgraceful act. However, my incessant tears did not warm his heart, and he showed no mercy, and continued to pummel my head to the ground to knock me senseless, but I shielded my head with one arm, and used the other to hit his eyes. He cried out in pain and momentarily released me, and I used this opportunity to escape from the room. For a moment, I was glad to be saved from utter disgrace and humiliation, but then shame washed through me like physical pain. I considered myself a victim, but at the same time, I blamed myself for the attacks. Why me? Why did those men target only me? I had no answer. No explanation. I was suffering terribly in pain and loneliness.

Such assaults continued to take place without any explanation. I could not imagine why these men were targeting me, stalking and following me for days, trying to find me alone in a place. I changed my address every week, sleeping under park benches, trying to hide away in obscure places.

I had become thin and pale. Every time I glanced at a mirror, there would be a sort of boundless sorrow and pain in my eyes. A sorrow so deep that I feared I could never grow out of it.

Twice, I was attacked by men inside my own rented apartment. After searching for residences, I requested room and lodgings from various landlords, but somehow, for mysterious reasons, they always canceled my contract after signing and agreeing to let me stay. I once confronted an elderly woman and asked her why she changed her mind after I paid the rent in full for three months. The woman replied angrily, saying a man had called her that morning to tell her I was a violent criminal and could not be trusted in her home. Therefore, she canceled my lease and I was forced to search elsewhere for lodgings.

The next month, I was lucky to see that a young man agreed to let me rent the upstairs of his small house. I knew that vile men might try to break in and attack me here, so I had bolted the door most thoroughly and locked all windows. However, that night, four huge men began to beat me in my sleep. I awoke and tried to defend myself, but I was pinned down to the bed. "Don't touch me!" I cried, masking the surge of fear, the incessant pain, under my show of indignation. Nothing I said could dissuade the criminals from hurting me. I screamed so loudly, that a neighbor called the police. Minutes later, the police lights flashed through the window, and the four men who were assaulting me looked shocked. From the glare of the blue and white lights, I saw their faces for the first time. I knew one of them! He was a veteran employee of the NSA black budget division. I have seen him numerous times in Richard's office and knew he was one of the most trusted members in his unit. Why was he assaulting me? My brain was fuzzy, but I heard the police siren getting louder, and the men abruptly released hold of my body and disappeared from sight. I jumped up and tried to find out where they left, and then I saw it. A trapdoor! There was an open trapdoor set in front of my bed! That was how the four men entered my room and assaulted me. I had locked the doors and bolted the windows but I could not save myself from being sexually used again. In sheer pain and humiliation, I began to pack my meager belongings and prepared to leave the rented room, and seek shelter elsewhere. The American police were knocking on the door, inquiring if I was alright. I allowed them to enter and reported the intruders, showing them how the four men broke into my room using the trapdoor. One of the officers noticed my smashed teeth, and blood streaming down my legs, and suspected that I was abused. The policemen then spoke kindly to me, asking me if the men hurt me, and wanted to take me to a hospital for a full checkup, but I assured them I was unhurt. I felt terribly embarrassed to admit I was assaulted by a group of men, so I remained quiet. I also knew that since it was Richard's NSA black ops employee who had attacked me, there was little the local law enforcement agency could do to protect me from powerful men like them. The officers wanted detailed description of the abusers and entreated me to file a police report, but I refused. One of the policemen brought in a rape kit to test me, but I vehemently refused. I did not want to have any official record stating that I was sexually assaulted. The shame would have been too much to bear. As soon as the police left, I packed my belongings in a small bag, and left the house. The next day, once more, I had no place to stay.

However, this time, I decided to investigate the cause of these assaults. I knew the NSA undercover employee who served Richard and I also knew where he lived. The next morning, I went to his work place and waited in the back of his car. When he entered the driver's seat, I immediately grabbed him, and warned him not to move. The man recognized me instantly and then looked very afraid. He begged me not to kill him, and apologized for assaulting me.

He said he was only following orders the previous night. The man continued to apologize profusely and said he had proof that Richard ordered him to assault me both physically and sexually and record the act. He showed me the postal mail receipt which he had used to send the video disc to Richard's private residence.

The second time I was almost assaulted by another man was a week later, but this time, I was prepared and carried a loaded weapon in the bathroom. When the man tried to grab me, I aimed the weapon very firmly at his face, and he immediately apologized. I questioned him rigorously and threatened to have him arrested if he lied, and the man eventually admitted that he was paid fifty thousand dollars to assault me sexually and to take pictures of those images. I wanted to know what he was supposed to do with the pictures, and he showed me an envelope in which he was instructed to send them. The address was Cynthia's personal residence! I was speechless with surprise that this man was hired to take compromising pictures of me and send them to Cynthia. Why would Richard go so far to make Cynthia hate me? I was at a loss for words.

In the span of two years, Richard sent at least five hundred women and over a thousand different men to attack me or force me to have relationship with them. He had hoped I would abandon Cynthia and leave her for one of those people who were hired to attack me. But mostly, he had strict orders to those men to record and video the assault. Their instructions were to show the images to Cynthia and make her believe that I was an indecent man. He hoped Cynthia would refuse to maintain any sort of relationship with me if she saw that other men were assaulting me.

Back in Kashmir, battle was raging.

Newspaper editors and television anchors gave daily reports on the brutal genocide and ethnic cleansing that was taking place on the native Kashmiri Pandits. This conflict was being touted as a Hindu-Muslim riot, but I knew the true story behind. People reading the news thought Kashmiris were killing their small minority population simply because they were Hindu, but they did not know that several hundred mercenaries were personally setting temples and mosques on fire in order to pitch one group against the other, so in the end, both factions had been forced to assume that they were being attacked by their rivals.

In what seemed like a surreal reel from a wartime television episode, I watched thunderstruck as groups of criminals posed as fake Hindus and fraud Muslim scholars and gave rousing speeches. They called on each side to take up arms and massacre neighbors and friends. I personally witnessed one of those incidents. One middle-aged man with long and thick beard and sporting a turban stood over the rooftop of a Kashmiri Mosque and claimed he was sent by Alla and Mahomet and ordered to kill all children and rape all women. In a thunderous voice, the man insisted that he was ordered by the Angel Gabriel to take all his followers and kill Hindus. He also warned that anyone who disobeyed him would be condemned to eternal hellfire. I listened in shock. The man's Hindi accent was unnatural. He was being unable to pronounce some common words in Urdu and Hindi. I guessed he was a foreigner, so when he descended from the rooftop, I followed him and saw he was entering a luxurious limousine. I leapt inside after him, and saw that he had already discarded his heavy turban. Then he attempted to push me out of the car, and in the melee, his artificial beard came off. He was a clean-shaven man of approximate forty years of age. He fought me fiercely and put me on a chokehold. I managed to push him off and grabbed his throat to stop him, but then my hands slipped. I glanced at my palms. It was covered in a layer of bronze powder that resembled makeup concealer. Then I looked at the man's face and neck. His original fair skin was showing from beneath the dark brown makeup. He was a white man, posing as Indian, and was wearing thick brown makeup along with a flowing black beard in order to pretend and convince the local Kashmiri people that he was a Muslims cleric.

I took custody of that man and transported him to the United States. When I deplaned, Richard was waiting for me. I told him about how this man was impersonating a Muslim priest and was inciting locals to start a genocide and riot, and Richard thanked me profusely. He also said he wanted to take custody of the imposter and hand him to the FBI for interrogations. I gladly acceded to his request and hailed a cab to go home. Just as I was about to enter the rear seat, I remembered that I had forgotten my carry-on. I returned to the arrival area to search for it, and then I saw Richard. He was walking leisurely with the criminal I had arrested in Kashmir, and they were drinking hot beverages. It did not look as though Richard was detaining him as a criminal. I decided to follow them and find out. After strolling calmly for several blocks, Richard and the mercenary man shook hands, and he got into an expensive jeep and roared away, while Richard took a taxi back to his residence.

I was still reeling from shock, because I had turned the man over to Richard hoping he would prosecute him, but instead, Richard let him go. I realized I had to establish justice myself, so I once more followed that man to his destination. He halted directly in front of the NSA black ops office headquarters. From afar, I noticed him taking out a key card and enter the private chambers. How did this man enter a secure NSA building? I knew that only Richard had access to the doors of this highly secretive building.

This time, I was more vigilant and detained that mercenary. Upon badgering him, the man finally admitted that he was an employee of one of the NSA's black budget programs, and later became a personal assistant to Richard. I demanded an explanation for why he was pretending to be an Indian Muslim religious leader and was inciting locals in Kashmir to commit acts of violence, and he pleaded innocence, insisting he was only following orders. Of course, I took great troubles to confirm his statements, and found copies of written orders that instructed him and sixty other men to masquerade as Indian religious leaders and give fiery speeches and encourage

townspeople to engage in mass killings, assault and genocide. Those mercenaries who were selected for this task were all fluent in Hindi, Urdu and Kashmiri language. It pained me greatly to see that Richard had personally given those orders, and dispatched the first team of mercenaries the day after I had returned from my vacation in Kashmir. I never found out why he did that because during that year, another terrible calamity befell me, which rendered me severely wounded and quite incapacitated.

It was during this month that Cynthia and I were celebrating our tenth anniversary of meeting each other for the first time, and I wanted to make the moment as memorable as possible and proposed to her. She was delighted with the idea of marriage but was afraid Richard would disapprove. I did not own a house, and nor did I have money in my bank account. The meager wages I earned was whatever Richard occasionally offered me as pocket money for my travelling expenses. It was not much, so I was nervous about asking for Richard's permission.

I wanted to discuss the terrible events that were taking place in India, but I tried not to antagonize Richard too much, lest he rejected me as a suitable prospect for his beloved daughter.

I had arrested and detained one of Richard's operatives in India, and later discovered that foreign mercenaries like this man constantly gave speeches and posed as fake Imams and Mufti, and proclaimed outlandish rhetoric. Many Indian Hindus joined the movement and chose to be part of the armed struggle. Fabricated stories about the militancy in Kashmir was propagated by local and state media, and fake clerics posed as Muslims, and stressed the importance of creating a homogenous society in the hilly enclave, and they called on locals to drive the Kashmiri Hindu minority out of their valleys.

Monuments, cemeteries, and houses of worship were being destroyed by mercenaries who wore costumes of local ethnic groups in order to make the other party believe that sectarian violence was in the making.

In Kashmir, the bloodshed that was going on was resembling an ethnic cleansing with thousands of people facing death or displacement each day. Several mosques were razed to the ground by masked mercenaries, who wore crimson Hindu traditional garbs. Hours later, residential houses of minority Hindu residents were burned and several temples were destroyed.

The deliberate and systematic destruction of the temples were an act of war, orchestrated by foreign mercenaries, many of whom were sent directly from the NSA black ops headquarters in West Virginia. I got in touch with the Pentagon officials who were in charge of South East Asian Intelligence Bureau, and they expressed utter shock when they heard about how mercenaries were pretending to be Indians and were killing civilians in India, framing Muslims and Kashmiris for it. After receiving my independent report, the State Department dispatched two senior ranking diplomats to inform the Indian leaders about how some rogue operatives had infiltrated their country and were acting in a criminal fashion without any authorization from the United States government in part or whole.

Richard told me he would double my commission and pay me hundred thousand dollars if I went to South America. At that time, I was unemployed, and lost the previous job as a boat repairman. But I still decided that it was enough. Running side missions for Richard had become far too dangerous for me, and I was afraid I would not survive another round of incessant torture. All I wanted to do was build a small house, and marry Cynthia and settle down in a suburban American town. I was ready to work in a shop or repair cars in a private garage and live in peace. I told Richard my plans, and he thankfully did not argue with me and bade me good night.

The next day, Cynthia and I watched her favorite baseball team, the Yankees. She was glad they beat the Mets 5-1, and went to a local restaurant to pick up dinner for the two of us. Just minutes after she left, I saw my phone's answering machine light was blinking. I could not imagine who would be calling me at this late hour, so I pressed play and listened to a minute long message. A mechanical voice mentioned how Cynthia was kidnapped. Panic and dread filled me as I thought of every possible scenario, trying to imagine how or what might have taken place. How could someone be kidnapped within minutes?

I remained frozen in my seat, hoping that someone would call and tell me I was only dreaming, but the kidnapper called again, and in a mechanical voice, he told me to bring them ten million dollars within three days if I wanted to see Cynthia alive again. I did not have any money with me, but the kidnappers hung up the phone before I could argue or protest. I slammed the phone in frustration, and screamed and banged my head against the wall.

Cynthia's youthful, boisterous manners captivated me from the first day. Now, the thought of losing her made me insane with fear.

During my training days, the Camp instructors taught us how to survive in the most horrific conditions and atmosphere. I was young, and it was exhilarating to learn so much. I felt the teenage years were a euphoric time of feeling both invincible and optimistic. Upon setting foot on American soil, I began to see the world in a different light after being through the harshest vicissitudes of life, when one by one, all the ideals I lived by and all the people I defended resembled more and more, a bandit clan. My heart was brimming in anguish and I was in the depths of loss, homesickness and hopelessness. I realized much later that I had fallen into utter darkness and that death was much more kind for a person like me who has so much pain and misery stored in his mind.

When the kidnappers threatened to hurt Cynthia, I thought my heart would stop beating forever. I had to collect her ransom money from somewhere, so I went back to Richard and begged him to give me a job. This time, he told me to go to five countries in South America, including Brazil and Chile. He said several weapons manufacturers owed him twenty million dollars, and I should locate their safe houses and steal the money from those men. I knew it was a dangerous job. Stealing money from weapons smugglers was a risk almost no one was prepared to take. Getting caught meant a sure death, but it was not usually a quick or merciful death. People on those parts of the world got very angry if someone stole their wealth, but I was prepared to undertake any task to get the money for Richard and save Cynthia.

Before I got on the plane to go to Brazil, Richard said the main task for me was to make sure the national parliamentary election does not take place. I had to disrupt the election by detonating explosives in the ballot centers.

I refused to participate in such anarchist behavior and flew to Brazil. I arrived there on the first week of November. The parliamentary elections were held one week later.

It was November, 1982, and the Democratic Social Party won the majority of the seats. Richard sent me an urgent telegram warning me to take measures to ensure the Democratic party leader does not ascend to power, but I ignored his message and returned to the United States.

To my surprise, when I arrived in Richard's house, I found Cynthia lounging happily in his patio. I was relieved to see that she was safe, but I asked her what had happened, and Cynthia said she was rescued from the kidnappers shortly after I left for Brazil.

Nearly a decade later, this fiasco in the Middle East grew exponentially. My dear friend Dustin had intercepted several communiqués from the Iraqi dictator. Iraq's leader was in contact with Richard and was being instructed to attack Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. However, this time, the gulf nation's president refused to take action. When Richard threatened him with deadly consequences, he reached out to Moscow for assistance. Kremlin high command assured him of military and financial support if he resisted the blackmail from Richard. In one of his last cables, the Iraqi leader was delivering a severe rebuke to Richard in which he rejects the idea of attacking Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran. As a reply to the Iraqi leader's message, Richard vowed to use the might of the United States military and the Western coalition to bomb Baghdad to the stone ages, and once more ordered him to use Iraqi troops and invade Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

It appeared as though the Iraqi dictator was buying for more time, and he acceded to one of Richard's requests, and launched an invasion into Kuwait. He, however, continued to refuse engaging in warfare with either Saudi Arabia or Iran.

Richard maintained his threats and immediately used his contacts in the State Department to lobby against the Iraqi leader, and established a coalition of 34 countries to bomb the gulf nation back to the stone age. The official excuse for the attack was to force the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. After Hussein failed to respond to the international ultimatum at the start of 1991, the international coalition consisting of the NATO allies and a handful of Middle Eastern countries began an aerial raid of an unprecedented scale to unanimously oppose Iraqi aggression. Officially, Russia protested such mass bombings, but could not send ground troops to aid the Iraqi leader. The Department of State approved Pentagon's plan for the infamous Operation Desert Storm, soon after, and the American soldiers successfully expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

During the Gulf crisis, Richard was in constant contact with the Iraqi leader, warning him of more attacks if he did not launch massive campaign against Iran and Saudi Arabia, but the Arab leader refused and subsequently paid the price by being bombarded by powerful fighter jets.

While the government politicians conducted diplomacy with the issue of Kashmir, I felt that I deserved a small break from my rigorous schedule and decided to think about my future with Cynthia. I wanted to get married to her. So, after speaking to Richard at a later hour and broaching the subject of my marriage, I decided to give Cynthia and her father some private time to think about my proposition. Richard always spoke in a very refined manner, but somehow, his demeanor changed when he heard of my plans. He warned me that marrying his daughter is not an easy matter, and that he would kill me if I caused Cynthia the slightest displeasure. I was a little stunned by his harsh words, especially because it was so out of character for him to speak in such crude tones, but I respectfully assured him that I had only the best intentions, and would never hurt Cynthia nor cheat on her.

During this time, Cynthia took internships at several prestigious firms in Los Angeles. For over three months, I did not see Cynthia, and when I tried to contact her, the phone was always busy. Worried about her welfare, I immediately flew to California to visit her and found that she was still working at the call center in LA. Cynthia was delighted to see me and we were glad to be together again. The conundrum of being unable to get in touch with her was simple. Apparently, her phone number had been disconnected by the phone company and she did not know I was trying to contact her.

Not wanting to be separated again, we began to make plans for our future. It was at that time Cynthia and I decided to wed officially. Even though we had exchanged wedding vows in 1982 at an Orthodox church, Cynthia expressed hope that we could be united as man and wife in the legal courts of the United States. So, when I proposed to her, she agreed at once and in utter joy, I suggested we get married in a civil court before any other obstacles came in our way. Cynthia was overjoyed at the suggestion, and during the next two days, we prepared all our legal documents and memorized our vows. Since setting foot in America, I have never been so happy and never felt so loved by another human being. With Cynthia, I felt safe and respected. I did not have to hide my true self or conceal my real identity.

Early in the morning, we took a cab and went to the court to validate our marriage license. The clerk took one look at the certificate and refused to sign it. He said there was a technical error. Cynthia was currently married according to court documents.

This revelation was doubly shocking to me since I truly loved Cynthia. But I also trusted her with my life and when Cynthia told me she was not married, I believed her and we headed to a different court. We had assumed that the State of California somehow mixed-up Cynthia's identity with someone else's, so applying via another court could solve this issue. This time, we crossed the border, and drove to Arizona. We went to the civil court in downtown Phoenix and asked the clerk to validate our marriage, but after running a quick background check, he reprimanded us, and said it was strictly prohibited for a married women to marry another man. He showed me court documents proving Cynthia was already married to someone. This time, Cynthia suggested that someone either set her up and used her identity to get married or the court was intentionally trying to stop her from marrying me.

I told her not to worry. We were in Arizona, only miles from the Mexican border. I assured Cynthia we can solve this dilemma by crossing the US border and get married in Mexico. Surely, the courts in Mexico would not be compromised, nor would they likely have anyone with the identical name and date of birth of Cynthia to cause technical errors.

With a free mind, we raced across the border in a rented pickup, and drove all night, until we found a court in Saltillo, where friendly staffs processed our papers and stamped our marriage certificates. Mexico was a beautiful country, and Cynthia wanted to spend some time in the warm climate. Since we just got married, it made sense to spend the honeymoon in a tropical city.

We checked into a modest hotel adjacent to a beach which was only sixteen miles from Cancun International Airport, and Cynthia and I spent hours strolling over the sandy beaches of this tropical country.

For several wonderful days, I spent every hour with my beloved Cynthia, and we made long-term plans for our future. Only a handful of times did Cynthia comment on the bizarre events that took place in the American courts. But I asked her to forget about all the discrepancies in the United States, and finally relax completely and enjoy our honeymoon together in the tropical country. I initially felt safe in Mexico, and for the first time in a long time, I did not constantly peer over my shoulders in the anticipation and nor did I worry about being identified, attacked or assaulted. However, three days after our arrival in Mexico, I was awakened by a sound of determined footsteps. It was the middle of the night, and the hotel housekeeping staff was not supposed to be around. I got up quietly and crouched behind the door, in case someone tried to barge in through the door. Then the door was kicked open, and two men rushed in, clad in black tactical chest rig, and face masks. I surprised one of them by leaping on his shoulder and knocking him to the ground. The other man saw his comrade fall and took off into the night. The intruder struggled to escape my grip but I quickly bound his hand with his own belt told Cynthia to call the hotel security and summon local police. While I waited for the police to arrive, I was curious to find out more about who tried to attack me and Cynthia. Going through the man's pockets, I found two tactical knives, a Glock 17 pistol with two magazines, several zip ties, a crowbar, pistol light, duct tape and gas masks. My blood froze as I inspected the items. These men had undoubtedly broken into my room to kidnap us. I assumed they were after both Cynthia and I, but somehow, I felt that I was the sole target.

When the police arrived, they asked us some cursory questions, and took pictures of the attacker. As they collected the evidence, I looked intently at the man's face. There was something so peculiarly familiar about that face. The same high forehead and juttled chin. I knew that man! But I couldn't ascribe any name to him just yet. He was a member of the security detail on one of Richard's trans-Atlantic flights in his private plane. I had happened to drive him to his jet because he was running late and that was when I saw this man- the very same person who had just now broken into my hotel room in Mexico. I knew an intelligent man never believes in coincidences, but I wanted to assume that this man attacking me and Cynthia had nothing to do with Cynthia's stepfather. After all, what would Richard gain by kidnapping me?

Meanwhile, I received a call from a close friend who sought my assistance in solving a case for the Department of Drug Enforcement. He asked if I could find a contact who lived in Mexico and forward the details to him. It seemed like a small task, and one that would likely save many lives, so despite being on a vacation, I agreed to help, and met my friend at an office building near the Venustiano Carranza Dam.

I then decided to remain in Mexico City and help my friend with his quest. It was vital to unearth the true identity of the criminal who was responsible for trafficking young children across borders, so I decided to call in Dustin, the brilliant computer programmer who had been a dear friend since I began to work for the NSA black ops division.

Dustin was sharing an office space with Aleks, a skilled electrician who had built more gadgets for me than I needed ever since we became acquainted five years ago. Aleks was one of the only friends I had in the Colonel's Camp, and he was stationed in the United States six months after I had arrived. We helped one another on our works and shared intel to execute successful missions. When Dustin told me Aleks was here, I knew this was a dense job, and so I agreed to help them.

When I arrived at Aleks' office, I was grateful and honored to have two of my closest friends with me. They talked about happier times, and both congratulated me on my marriage to Cynthia. Eventually it got late and Dustin took his leave.

Aleks and I were discussing one of his projects and he showed me how he had crafted a unique sonar device that could not only detect marine life but identified any living creature within a mile. Such interesting items I was learning about that neither of us noticed the windows of the office building slowly rolling open. When I saw a shadow flitting behind me, I spun on my heels but it was too late. Several intruders swarmed the small office and lunged at us, smashing Aleks to the tiled floor. I shielded myself with both arms and tried to fight back, but ended up getting smashed in the face several times.

The flames on the small stove beside the pantry was flickering, and one of the masked intruders grabbed my head and yanked me to the fire, throwing my body over the stove top. From the corner, I heard Aleks shout my name calling for help. I tried in vain to shake off the powerful grip of my assailants, but was unsuccessful. The cries of agony were still echoing in my ears when red hot fire seemed to consume me at once.

It was as though someone had dragged me directly through the gates of hell. My body was burning, and just when I thought the assailants had left, I felt the edge of a rifle strike my spine between my shoulder blades. Someone pushed me hard, causing my body to slump facedown into the furnace. Never before had I faced such fiery flames before, and I was sure they had dropped me into a blazing pit of fire. I could smell the burnt flesh of my cheek and lips before the intense pain registered in my mind. Seconds later, I began feeling excruciating pain on my chest and face. I cannot possibly describe the tormenting sensation that coursed through my body, but it felt someone was burning and piercing every inch of my body.

Flame spread over my shirt and engulfed my entire body, and the men who had tossed me over the stove turned and ran away from the growing blaze. The leaped over the fence and bolted before the fire could burn them, but I was alone, trying to stay alive. Dark smoke continued to billow out from the doorways and windows of the three-story building as I rolled on the ground at least ten times and extinguished the flames that had spread over my clothes, and then I saw the still figure of my dear friend. He did not look alive so I crawled to where Aleks was lying face down, beside the working table. Through the black smoke that was spreading all over the place, I saw Aleks. His face was blackened and burned beyond recognition, and there was no sign of life in his eyes. My friend was dead, killed by a brutal enemy.

I wanted to remain with Aleks, to whisper a prayer over his body, but the fire began to get out of control. The dense smoke made breathing doubly difficult. I knew within minutes, the entire building will be reduced to rubble, so I backed to the exit, pulling Aleks along. His dead weight felt increasingly heavy with each step, but I managed to get him out just in time. Seconds later, the ground shook as the giant building burst into crimson flames.

I tried to get up and move my legs, but they were strangely immobile. Somehow, one of my legs hung at an odd angle, and suspected that it was broken. Hoping to find help, I began to crawl along the road, dragging my friend's dead body along. Several times, I tried to stand, but my legs would not cooperate. I finally collapsed at the side of a main road, hoping someone would come to rescue me. But the sun was getting hotter and the Mexican summer showed no sign of abating. I knew I had to find a shade to soothe the burns on my skin, so I crawled urgently away from road, and into the marshy field nearby. I had gone less than twenty paces when my strength had diminished completely, and I dropped in to a heap, thoroughly unconscious.

I awoke to the chatter of several elderly men. When I opened my eyes, one of them spoke in Spanish, explaining how they found me near a deep marsh, nearly dead. An elderly farmer had transported me to his home and dressed my wound very superficially, but somehow, I felt very much alive. My legs were still not functional, but I could move my torso, and sit up with some effort. I used my limited Spanish vocabulary and asked the Mexican farmer if there was a hospital nearby. He understood and explained that I was in his house for two days, and was unconscious the entire time. He promised to bring a mule-cart and drop me off at a village clinic. I didn't know how else to thank the man for his kindness, except to repeat '*gracias*' as many times as I could. Hours later, I was dropped at the doorstep of a medical center. The nurses logged me in as a patient and wheeled me to a waiting room. The physician took one look at me and announced that they lacked the instruments to operate on me, and recommended that I be sent to the main city hospital. On his orders, I was shuttled to an ambulance and taken directly to the hospital operating room.

However, I heard a faint commotion, and a sound of several men arguing. Then I heard a gunshot, and from the corner of my eye, I saw one of the hospital nurses falling dead. Then the man with the gun entered the operating room, his guns drawn. I recognized his clothes. He was one of the assailants who had attacked the factory building and murdered my dear friend Aleks. These were the criminals who had burned my body and turned me into a cripple.

I knew that only one thing could save me. I needed to escape and go as far away from this hospital as I could before these men could hurt me again. But planning such an evasive move was more than useless, for I was in no condition to move.

But as the armed men swarmed around the wheeled stretcher, I pretended to be asleep but began to succumb to fear. I truly cannot describe my feebleness and the physical pain I was experiencing. Never before had I experienced such fatigue, pain and weakness in every fiber of my body. But another voice in my head told me to move away from the hospital room as quickly as possible. I waited until the men left and then I used every last drop of strength in my body and forced my bandaged body to lunge to the right, and I expected heavily on the tiled floor with a sickening crunch. My legs were hanging uselessly at one awkward angle. With a sinking feeling in my heart, I saw that I could not move either of my legs. From the corner of the slightly ajar door, I saw that the armed men who were heading towards me began to march down the hospital corridor, undoubtedly expecting to find me securely strapped to the handicap gurney. I knew I could not allow them to capture me again, so I hurriedly began to crawl on my hands and knees. It was an excruciating move but I pushed myself to drag my broken body through the emergency exit, and rolled roughly over the steel stairs before finally landing with a thud on the crude and littered pavement. The sun was disappearing swiftly down the horizon, but I found it easier to navigate over the long slopes of uneven sidewalk in the moonlight. It was easier than the long and arduous crawl across the hospital corridors, where I had to escape the notice of the nurses and security guards. Trying to place as much distance between me and the lurking dangers in the hospital, I tried to move faster, clawing the ground, forcing my body to crawl faster. But soon, I was tired. In addition to pain and nausea, I was fraught by a new terror so formidable that I thought my heart would stop, and it was the undiluted fear of being alone.

I turned several times and looked back, half contemplating on whether to take my chances with the dangerous men in the hospital, but my instincts told me to push on. The valley adjacent to the hospital had become a minor ravine, with thick forest on both sides. I crawled deeper and deeper, until nightfall, and then in the moonlight, I continued to seek safety in the fragmentary veins of evening light.

Gravely wounded and alone, I was trying to escape for the unspecified danger that waited for me in the medical facility. This was a rough terrain. I realized that I would not be able to stumble forward blindly. The physical effort was making me terribly weary. I found it hard to keep my swollen lips closed and as I took in my breath- it was as if I drew in long draughts of salt, sometimes icily sharp, sometimes scalding, as they hit the cracks of my mouth and scorched my bloated tongue.

This tedious trek over the burning hills was painful, but it was a far more tolerable than the agonizing torment I had faced in the medical clinic.

There, I was an epitome of misery. My helpless body had been nearly paralyzed when paramedics left me at the hospital bed, and I could barely move, and each second felt as though it were going to be my last. Finally, the physicians came and took a look at my burnt face and blistered skin, and noticed that my shin and forearm were broken and a number of ribs had been fractured. The chief surgeon arrived and agreed to carry out a surgery, but he placed me on a waiting list. For hours, I wailed in agony, the broken bones felt like shards of hot metal piercing into my flesh. Blood from my facial injuries were streaming into my eyes, partially blinding me. I tried to move but ended up falling to the hard marble floor, worsening my already damaged limbs. Two stony faced orderlies came with a paper that looked like rap sheets. They proceeded to yank me to a metal gurney and used metal cuffs to strap my arms and legs to the railings. I began to protest and demanded to see a doctor, but they stared with hard eyes, and ignored me. One of them stuffed the sheet into his overalls, and I noticed the butt of a handgun bulging from a hidden holster. What was a medical orderly doing with a loaded weapon, inside the hospital? The second man was scrawling a note and gluing it to the side of the gurney. The note read: treatment complete-patient ready to checkout. Again, he seemed to consult the rap sheet, so blinking quickly, I tried to make out the letters on the sheet of paper. A small two-by-two picture adorned the top left corner. It was my picture! With fresh horror, I realized that the two men did not come to this medical clinic by accident. I was the target. But what did they want from me? Terror bubbled in my throat as I thought the surgeon would fail to carry out the vital surgery on me, after he sees this note attached to my stretcher. However, I resolved to let him know as soon as he passed through the corridor. I would shout for help. I will not be helpless.

No sooner had these hopeful thoughts crossed my mind, I saw the armed man bringing the needle of a syringe to my collarbone. It was filled with a clear substance. He began to bring it closer to my face, then abruptly plunged it into my collarbone. The biting sting of the thick needle burned my skin and punctured a hole in my internal muscles. But moments later, my eye lids began to feel heavy, and I

felt the eyes drooping. I fought to keep my senses alert and eyes wide open, but whatever noxious substance the masked man injected me with was working and I was passing out into a dreadful blackness. I was fading into an obscure nothingness.

When I awoke, I had no sense of time or space. My eyes cracked open, but my eyelids felt heavy like stone. The room I was in looked grossly unfamiliar.

My face was still partially bandaged and I felt sharp throbbing pain in my knees. It was a notoriously disagreeable sensation but a faint relief washed over me. I *could* feel pain, which meant my legs had not been totally paralyzed. I clutched onto the hope that there may be a chance for me to recover. Perhaps one day, I will walk again.

Then I felt tingling sensations in my arms. It was aching terribly so I tried to move them. However, no matter how much I tried to lift my forearm, I could not do it. Then I saw the metal cover, muck like a heavy arm band, that fastened both my arms to the side of the steel bed. My eyes bulged in horror as I attempted feebly to move my hand, but the metal bindings were unrelenting. With a terrible jolt of fear, I realized that I had been chained to the metal stretcher for some reason.

For several hours, I was alone in the terrible desolate room. Finally, hours after I ceased attempting to free myself from the bonds of the metal cuffs, a hard-faced orderly entered. He inspected the locks of the metal cuffs impersonally and walked to the exit door. I called out earnestly and begged him to release the bindings from the stretcher so I could move. The man ignored me and locked the heavy door behind him.

Losing hope, I felt fresh panic bubbling in my chest. What was this place? Why aren't there any doctors to inspect my pitiable condition? Where are the nurses? Was I still in the hospital?

Such questions flooded my mind, but I refused to accept that this was my fate. Someone would help. There must be someone here who would show some compassion.

The wait was endless. Another twelve hours passed, and I became fervently restless. Unable to move even a centimeter, my back began to ache. The fractured bones in my arms and legs ached terribly and I could feel sharp pain on the parts of my skin which was burnt in the fire.

Fading in and out of consciousness, I tried to keep a track of time. It seemed that at least two days had passed. Then the door opened. This time, two men in white overalls entered and stuffed a straw in my mouth. They ordered me to drink a vial of thick porridge. I protested and demanded to be taken to a surgeon, but they forced me to finish the miserable meal and left. Another forlorn day quickly passed, and this time, no one came to check on me. It had been more than three days that I had been locked in this room, and chained to a metal stretcher in my debilitated state. My injured body was breaking down, as was my spirit. I dissolved in tears because I could not understand what was happening to me any longer.

My stomach burned. I was hungry, I was thirsty, but most importantly, I had the extreme urge to use the toilet. The sharp pain in my stomach persisted, and with horror, I realized that I had dysentery. My upset stomach made me desperate to use the bathroom. I waited until an orderly came and asked him to take me to a bathroom, but the man laughed derisively and said they had orders to keep me chained to the stretcher. Then they left.

The stabbing pains in my face and neck were overwhelming, and I could feel the bleeding blisters on my feet getting infected, and this ate away at my resolve. I could not control my bladder or bowels and was compelled to relieve myself on the stretcher.

My intestines were on the verge of exploding, as streams of vile liquid exited my pathetic body and covered the metal casings, the dark excrement dripped into the cold stone floor. My nostrils burned from the pungent odor and I shut my eyes, hoping to disappear from the face of earth, just so this suffering could end.

For three days, I was forced to remain immobile in that vile state, and with each passing hour, I felt the skin on my back and thigh becoming grievously sore, as lesions began to appear all over my body. My feet seemed to have swollen too. They pressed painfully against the metal bindings, as I remained soaked in the revolting filth, drowning in fecal matter. Words could never describe the terrible agony I faced in that plaguing clinic, but it is true that the mind has strange ways of forgetting the horrors of the past, and so I noticed my brain refusing to recall those horrid episodes from my unmitigated life. I was drowning in waste matter, and the orderly intentionally kept me soaking in crap, until I could not bear the decaying stench. Each hour, the decomposing excrement formed miserable infestations and I noticed maggots and small wormy things crawling over my body, burning my raw skin.

I continued to suffer from severe stomach pain and diarrhea. My skin burned in agony and my back muscles ached more severely each passing day, but none of the masked men who came in the room showed the slightest iota of humanity. The fifth day, my heart started beating hysterically, and I was certain my breathing would cease. I was enduring a hysteric panic attack and the lesions on my torso had become infected, and somehow, the orderly summoned a doctor who listened to my chest with a stethoscope. I used this opportunity to plead with the physician and begged him to release the metal cuffs from my arms and legs, and to at least have an orderly clear the waste matter from the metal cot and remove the crawly organisms from tormenting me. Despite my severely injured jaw, and

partially burnt facial muscles, I explained how I was suffering, but the man displayed an impassive face to my pleading, and without another word, turned to leave. I heard him murmur to the staff, and he audibly mentioned that I was likely suffering from malaria and had high fever. My splitting headache was killing me, but I did not want to give up, so I stretched my hands from beneath the metal chains, trying to grab the items on the bed side table. My fingers brushed against the metal handle of a pitcher. I clutched it precariously and banged it against the metal gurney, trying to solicit attention from the physician, hoping he would release me from this terrible state of existence. But my efforts were futile. The doctor shouted angrily and ordered the orderly to beat me. I did not imagine how this would even be possible. How could two men beat someone in my condition, a grievously wounded patient strapped to a cot, infected with malaria and suffering from high fever? They immediately produced a whip and hit me nearly a hundred times until all the uninjured skin on my body became bloodied. Then one of them picked up a baton and began to strike me most viciously, and my already fractured ribs then cracked painfully. My mind was vacant due to this grisly pain, but the captors showed no pity. How could they understand my torment- for would to God that I had suffered - more than anyone I have known or seen.

I was screaming uncontrollably. Soon, my voice had gone hoarse from the screaming. Pathetic groans were emanating from my burnt lips. Then I tried to speak again, and yelled at the medical doctor, but he ordered the men to sedate me if I made another outburst like this again. I goaded him to give me a strong sedative, hoping it would quickly end my life. But he strolled away without another glance in my direction. My screams echoed uselessly off the walls as tears rolled down my face. For the first time, I truly felt as though I was drowning in pain and sorrow.

The next day, a medical assistant wearing a white overall coat, came to force feed me the same gruesome liquid and this time, I refused to ingest that. I reacted violently when the man tried to stuff the liquid in my mouth, and using my fingers, I attempted to strike him. But I was no match for the man, and he backed away from the cot, and returned minutes later with the doctor. The physician looked livid with anger, and he approached the stretcher and inspected my sore leg, before commenting casually that he would amputate it immediately. I began to scream and curse the man and warned him not to cut off my legs, but he scoffed, and remarked that if I continued to behave in this aggressive manner, he would cut off both my legs. The threats from the doctor were unlike anything I had experienced.

Why was this happening to me? Why? Why? I shouted and wept at the same time, my helpless cries piercing the dank and putrid air of the small enclosed room. The doctor ignored my screams and told the two orderlies to transfer me to a surgery table.

They obeyed at once, and began to remove the chains from my arms and legs. For a fleeting second, relief and joy rushed over my heart, as I momentarily felt that I was free. But as quickly as the optimistic thought came, it passed, and the reality sunk in. I was being transferred to an operating room so that a sick minded doctor could amputate both my legs. My very own feet would be gone! The thought was so frightening that I almost became paralyzed with fear. Would I never be able to walk again? No! I cannot let it happen to me. Suddenly, my heart began to pound fiercely and I knew that this was my only chance of freedom. My heart beat was echoing through my ears as I tried to focus on escaping. I willed my body to move, and after five days of being tied and chained to a metal cot, and having to remain submerged in my own filth, the muscles in my arms and legs refused to cooperate. I had bed sores and deep lesions on every cervix of my skin. But I knew I must try. This was my chance. I had to escape! Now.

With this goal clouding my mind, I mustered all my strength and waited for both my legs to be freed, and then I lashed out, striking one of the men in the chin. When he doubled over, the other orderly threw a violent blow on my head. I remembered to duck just in time and slammed my elbow in the orderly's face. He staggered. I used this brief moment to grab his lab coat and shoes, and put them on. I placed my weight gingerly on my feet, and slipped them into a pair of shoes belonging to the orderly. My toes were sore and puffed against the shoe, even though the size was much larger than mine.

Escaping from the fateful room was not overtly difficult, because the building was not guarded, and instead of high fences, it was surrounded by small clearings and a steep rocky slope. I was eager to place as much distance between myself and the terrible prison but moving my battered and bruised body over those uneven rocks became more and more difficult. My injured feet hurt severely with each step, as I repeatedly fell on my face and inadvertently hurt myself, scraping my face against the cold jagged rocks. The flicker of hope that ignited within me was dying away. Overcome by a stupor of fatigue, I wanted to drop to the ground and sink into a blissful sleep.

However, it was not to be.

I had to fight on.

The sun was descending swiftly over the horizon, and I staggered ahead, hoping to reach a friendly neighborhood and seek help from a law enforcement officer. For several hours, I was on the move, shuffling over the uneven surface, taking beleaguered steps even as my heart pounded fiercely in trying to keep the body functioning. After I took about a hundred small steps, exhaustion overtook my senses and I was compelled to hastily lie down, pressing my stomach on the rough concrete. I lay with my face on the cold broken rock, feeling my chapped lips burning on the ground. Twice, I was tempted to give up. Oh, it would have been so easy just to lie there and die

away, to be lost and forgotten, to be gone from this world, disappeared from the face of earth, with none to seek or mourn me. Then the thought of Cynthia floated in my head. We had so joyfully married only a fortnight earlier, and that we had vowed to cherish one another until death. It was unthinkable to leave Cynthia behind and to make her fend for herself alone. No! I cannot die! Not yet. Thus, as swiftly as the notions of death entered my mind, I banished those ideas from my head and resolutely struggled to my feet.

My body was on the verge of a breakdown and I was forced to halt and take a break on the crude stone ground. In one of these rests, I went off into a stupor of fatigue, and stumbled around in a drugged daze, not really asleep or awake, but wavering unsteadily over the place I had fallen. I cannot know if I had become unconscious but when my senses returned, I was once more in the desolate terrain, my eyes aching from the glare of burning sunlight, my scalp scalding in the heat, with blood from lesions plastering my matted hair to my head.

I was suffering and I was afraid. But like a blind man, I staggered on, restlessly and desperately, hoping to come across civilization, praying that a kind soul would have mercy on me.

The sparkling street lights of the city were directly ahead. Relief washed over me as I watched the city bustle with life and laughter. I would be saved.

Mustering all my remaining strength, I raced across the street, and collapsed at the feet of a traffic sergeant. I begged for help, and tried in broken Spanish, to explain my precarious situation. But to my utter horror, no coherent words exited my mouth. In the frenzy of escaping, I had completely forgotten that my lips and face were badly bruised. The untreated burns on my lips caused it to puff and press against my nose, while my lips were so swollen that I could scarcely breathe, let alone speak. However, the man understood, and placed me in the back of a patrol vehicle, and gave a volley of instruction to the policeman seated behind the wheel. The door shut and I briefly shut my eyes, fear and despair ebbing away from my tortured, filthy and emaciated body. Then I heard a familiar click. I had heard the noise thousands of times in my life. It was the unmistakable metallic click of a weapon being loaded. I parted my tired eyelids a fraction of a centimeter, and found myself staring into the barrel of a handgun. The Mexican policeman was aiming the gun intently at my face, steadying the weapon with both hands. I reacted instinctively and dived under the seat, just as the gun went off, ricocheting in the enclosed space. The policeman tried to level the gun again, but the front seat prevented him so he leaped out and came to the passenger side of the door. Before he could open my side of the door, I yanked the door handle and kicked it open with as much force as possible, and he went sprawling on his back, his belongings spilling out of his pocket. A photograph lay beside him. It was my picture! A printed note below stated the person who shot me dead would be gifted a million pesos. I was frozen in shock, not understanding why someone would pay Mexican policemen millions of pesos for assassinating me. Before the man could recover, I bolted.

This time, my destination was uncertain. I half-walked, half-crawled through the filthy side streets of Mexico City and tried to look for shelter. By this time, I realized that the men who had attacked me in the office building and killed all my friends had taken great pains to ensure I never made it out alive. I realized that they had paid many policemen to murder me, because it was only logical that I would approach the law enforcement people.

I was in dire need of medical attention, but hospitals were out of the question. I had seen how the last clinic turned out, and now I had no doubt that many, if not most, of the medical aides would likely be paid by those criminals who targeted me. Now, I only sought a place to rest.

Darkness was descending on the alley and I crumpled to the ground, somehow breaking into fits of sobs. I tried not to think of all the things that transpired in the past week, and how I ended up laying on a side road, in the poorest neighborhood of Mexico, wounded and alone. Then my sorrowful reverie was broken by a burst of rain. It was pouring. Sharp prickles of water flooded into my eyes as I struggled to find a dry spot to sit. The pavement was getting bogged with mud and dirty sewer water. Fresh pain wracked my head as the rainwater re-opened the scars on my scalp, and I saw the wounds opening and bleeding profusely. I hurriedly clutched several cardboard boxes from the large roadside bins and used it to cover my face and protect my upper body from the incessant rain. That night, I slept fretfully amidst the boundless rain, with sagging cardboard boxes as my only shelter from the harsh wind and storm.

In the morning, I awoke from pangs of extreme hunger. Before this day, I had not known how painful starvation can be. One really suffers, not only from a burning agony in the stomach, but also from headaches and nausea. I was in no condition to travel, work or even pay a visit to open markets. My face looked hideous, with fragments of my teeth hanging out, crushed jowl, a heavily burned eyelid and deeply injured cheek. The bandages that were wrapped around my head resembled some bizarrely outlandish mummified soldier who had died in battle years ago. It was not only blood soaked but terribly filthy.

I wanted to hide in this alley and slowly die away, but hunger forced me to move. I racked my brain for any possible refuge, and slowly the most obvious place popped into my head. Of course, Cynthia would be waiting for me at our hotel room. Why had I not considered this before? With renewed vigor, and happiness seeping into my heart, I took off, threading past crowded walkways, and jaywalked to the hotel we were staying at. Without a moment's hesitation, I crossed the four-lane road and was about to reach out and

push the glass doors that led to the reception area, but then something caught my eye. Three heavily armed men were scouring the lobby, studying the faces of each guest as they stepped in. With horror, I realized they were searching for me, knowing I might come here, sooner or later. It was an obvious move, and in my eagerness to see Cynthia again, I had overlooked the fact that the people who had tried to kill me may target her as well in order to use her as bait. I knew it was impossible to enter the hotel without being gunned down, so I waited outside, disguised as a vagrant, covered in several soiled cardboard boxes. My face was almost entirely covered in bandages and the injuries pained with vigor, signaling that I had infection, but none of that mattered anymore. I was determined to wait outside, and talk to Cynthia after she came out. I did not have to stand there for long.

These waiting was slowly building towards a crescendo of anxiety in my heart, and then I saw her figure exiting the spiraling glass doors of the hotel. I wanted to rush to Cynthia and tell her what had happened to me, but I forced myself to wait. There were the armed men only a few meters away, and they would be able to spot me at once. I needed to exercise caution.

I followed Cynthia from a distance, and when she strolled into a lightly packed road, I got nearer and called her name.

"Cynthia!"

My newlywed bride whirled around and gave out a stifled cry.

I saw a look of sheer horror on her face as she cried, "What *are* you?"

"It's me, Cynthia, it's me!" I croaked, but instead of words, an awful rumbling noise emanated from my lips. I realized my speech was likely incoherent, but why didn't Cynthia recognize me? I went closer to her, and tried to gesture vigorously, repeating her name, but Cynthia shrank away in revulsion. My breathless pain culminated as I tried to speak to my beloved Cynthia, but she shook her head violently in confusion and I had to visibly collect myself, keeping my eyes downcast and breathing deeply as I tried to pull my head back up to continue the difficult discourse.

My dearest Cynthia continued to back away from me, and even time appeared to slow down as I lowered my head in capitulation, and my world felt suspended for me. My emotional pleas were ignored even as I tried to understand the excruciating frustration of Cynthia who could not discern my burnt and deformed features.

I reached out with one of my bandaged hands and gestured towards her wedding ring, hoping she would realize it was me, but Cynthia screamed and warned me to stay away. I didn't want to give up, so I continued to follow her, calling her name, explaining that I was not a stranger, and that I was injured. For the entire expanse of the cobbled street, Cynthia ran and I chased after her, trying to make her recognize me, but she was convinced I was a random vagrant trying to attack her, and as soon as she reached an intersection, she grabbed the hand of a policeman, and waved towards my direction.

I watched helplessly as the policeman gestured energetically at his aide and waved his arm round and round, clearly instructing them to search for someone. This was the end. I would be found and captured again if I remained here.

Run. That was all I could think of. Run and hide. Run and hide. All I could see ahead of me was a lonesome life devoid of love or joy. I was ill fated, and destined to traverse a solitary road which stretched before me, a path so long and barren through the waste of pain and time. Without medical care, without food or shelter, I knew I would die soon, and it will not be long before vultures swoop across the smog-filled city skies, and flock earnestly above my rotting corpse, awaiting the feast my dying body offers them. Alas! The terrible twists of fate that compelled me to make difficult choices in my life, and oh, the thoughts and actions which brought upon me such pain. My heart felt heavy as I regretted Cynthia's lost love. I was burdened with my own sorrow, carrying forth the weight of a thousand grief upon my soul. I suspected Cynthia had reported me to the authorities, and this meant the police would arrest me again and this time, I may not survive attacks from policemen or inmates of the Mexican prison who were paid to kill me. I swiftly turned and ran into a side road, and hid under a garbage bin, so that the police could not find me. Once the danger of being discovered passed, a new wave of despair flooded over my body. All this time, my only hope had been dearest Cynthia, with whom I had vowed to remain for the rest of my life, and I was so certain that once I found her, every sorrow in my life would disappear, but now she did not even recognize my horribly burnt and wounded body. This was one of the most difficult truths for me. The reality was not easy to digest as I kept thinking about how Cynthia and I drove across continental United States, and how we had eagerly searched for civil courts to register our marriage and how we delved into the most incredible honeymoon I could ever dream of, but all of that was gone from my life in several petrifying moments when the armed assailants barged into the workplace and killed my friends and beat me to the very inch of my life before thrusting my semi-conscious and battered body into a cauldron of blazing fire, shattering my cheekbones and leaving all my front teeth to break into hundreds of pieces, and like the shifting of sand, my happiness was erased. I had no one now.

I had nowhere to go and continued existing pitifully in the streets. There was no shelter from stormy nights and blazing daylight sun. A handful of decaying paper boxes and pieces of cardboard sheets were my only refuge from nature's adversities. I dozed off several times during the night, getting accosted by tropical insects and stinging flies, and at the break of dawn, unable to stay alone any longer, I

went back to Cynthia's hotel, and stood on the farthest pavement. I knew she had not recognized me the first time, but maybe if I tried again, she would understand. At the very least, I will have caught a glimpse of her beautiful and familiar face.

Cynthia's silhouette came into view. She was engrossed in polite conversation with a well-dressed young man. He looked familiar, and I guessed he had been the hotel manager. After bidding him farewell, Cynthia exited the hotel and began to take a stroll along the street. She walked leisurely, pausing at the windows of roadside shops, occasionally purchasing traditional items and local souvenirs. She did not notice me, so I fell a few steps behind her and called her again. With my painfully hoarse voice, I tried to explain who I was, but Cynthia cast a terrified look at my injured and burnt face, and fled, screaming at the passersby to assist her. Crestfallen, I swiftly ran away, yet again. Part of me did not expect Cynthia to recognize me, but I merely wanted to see her again, and remain somewhere close to her person, so that if I died in this agonizing condition, I, at least, would not have to die alone. I could have forfeited my final breaths knowing my Cynthia was nearby. But, alas, that did not work out.

After another day of terrible agony, I still could not find any place to shelter or receive medical care, but I decided to give up on meeting Cynthia. She was afraid of me, and had not honestly recognized me in this pitiable state. How could I blame her? She did not know I was wounded in the accident. She was unaware of my ordeal at the fake hospital where orderlies tortured me for nearly a week. There was nothing she could do for me.

My mind was shutting down from despair and when twilight fell, I tried to close my eyes and forget about the horrors I had faced. I lay my head on the cold and filthy concrete slab and tried to sleep, but at that moment, my eyes fell on another homeless man engrossed in deep slumber. His eyes were only half closed but he was snoring audibly. Suddenly my heart began to race. I started choking on my own breath. The homeless man had a familiar face, the same chin, and bristle of dark mustache. It was my dear friend Aleks! But Aleks was dead! He succumbed to the eight bullets that were fired at him. He had died before my very eyes, and begged for help, as the assailants were plunging my face into the stovetop, scalding my face to the bones, melting my muscles. I could still hear his voice, gargling and incoherent, asking me to help him. Then the man on the pavement stirred, his eyes wide open, death gaping at me, and he called my name. Sweat broke out on my forehead and I leaped to my feet to help my friend, but the moment I stood, Aleks was gone. In his place, a local vagrant was fast asleep. With a shaky sigh, I sank to my knees, and burst into tears. I was so certain the man was my friend. I had wanted him to stay alive, to survive, but I could not save him. With his dying breath, Aleks begged for help, but I couldn't help him. Life was so doubly unfair! Why was I condemned to live and suffer the pain of witnessing my friends die? Why did I have to see them in their throes of death, knowing there was nothing I could do to prolong their lives? Oh, would to God that I had died in his place.

I must have passed into either a very deep sleep or some level of unconsciousness, because when I opened my eyes, my body was curled into a ball, as I had instinctively tried to protect myself from the chills of the howling winds that were accelerating. I knew a storm was approaching, so I forced myself to get to my feet. I could not see straight and wandered cruelly and blindly about for several minutes before I fell down. The fall seemed to wake me and began to walk in the direction of a factory. From afar, I saw that it resembled a ten-story warehouse, with brick walls on two sides and scaffoldings and steel panels on the other sides. The place had boarded windows and no workers appeared to be in sight. It was abandoned, I realized with relief. I could take shelter there from the storm.

For the next few days, my body recuperated enough to walk a few steps without falling unconscious. I was able to protect my raw wounds from the rain, while sleeping inside the bare factory building, and ate whatever scraps I could pick from the street side bins. I was still in terrible pain but tried to collect used gauzes and other castaway medicines from the garbage dump in order to protect my open injuries from further exposure. It was in this worn down building where I first came face to face with a tinted glass. The grime on either side made it resemble a mirror, and I could see my face for the first time. When my eyes fell on the image staring back at me, I gave such an involuntary cry that I nearly fainted. Grasping the side of a wall, I steadied myself and studied the disfigured face before me. My face looked...not very human! The flesh around the lower part of my jaw was entirely missing. With terrified eyes, I saw my bare teeth visible between the gaping hole in my black and burnt facial muscle. With a shout, I stuffed the dirty gauze over my face to conceal the mangled muscled and gums.

When I finally ceased weeping, I continued wrapping a strip of stained and yellowing band over the rest of my burned face when I heard someone calling my name. The noise was coming from the courtyard in front of the factory. Cynthia's voice echoed again, as she seemed to call me, this time a little louder. But it couldn't be real! I kept thinking it was a dream; a very cruel dream. Why was my brain playing such a harsh jest on me? Why was I being tricked into believing Cynthia was here searching for me? She did not even know I was here, or if I was even alive.

I slowly fastened my bandages and shuffled ahead, crawling across the grimy floor, moving tentatively over to the boarded window. From a small crack in the sides, I cautiously peeked into the pavement. Cynthia! She was standing right in front of the factory

and turned round and round, looking for anyone who might be around. Then she again shouted: "I know you are there, honey, and I know you are probably hiding from me, but please come out."

I hesitated because the last time Cynthia saw me, she ran away in fright, so I remained inside the building. Then Cynthia spoke again and explained how she had been thinking about the bandaged man who was chasing her for two days, and she now realized it was me. She also said she had been searching through these roads to find me for several days, and some locals told her a homeless man was picking the trash along the main roads, so she had come to this location hoping to find me. Cynthia begged me to show myself and then I saw she was shedding some tears. I finally understood that Cynthia would not run away from me, because she knew this horribly wounded man was none other than the man who had married her only weeks ago.

I staggered to my feet and slowly moved in front of an open window clearing. Sure enough, my Cynthia was there, her face beaming with relief, and she ran in. However, taking one look at my face, she began to cry and tried to pull me to my feet, and demanded that I visit a hospital. I shook my head, and with trembling jaw, tried to explain that the people in all city hospitals had been hired and paid by my enemies to kill and torture me. I could not leave this hiding place. Uttering each word was excruciatingly painful, but I managed to speak a few more phrases to Cynthia. She understood my dilemma and told me she would go to the city center and purchase medical supplies, clothes and food and bring them to me.

Less than an hour later, Cynthia returned, her arms laden with shopping bags, and boxes of medical equipment. She immediately began to apply salves and other healing ointments on my burns, and dressed my wounds. I was still in severe pain, so Cynthia went back to the drug store and purchased powerful painkillers and surgical gauze. Despite the pain and discomfort, an ethereal joy and comfort brimmed in my heart, as I sat next to Cynthia, knowing I was no longer alone, and had someone to love me. It was a strange feeling to be able to eat regular fresh food, especially since I had been living off rotten items from the garbage bins.

For the brief moment when I saw my scarred and injured face reflected on the grimy glass of the window, I thought a frightening alien was standing in my place. I had never considered myself to be beautiful; but my scarred face looked horrific even to myself. My bright face framed with flaxen light hair had looked very different from this. Now, the outer skin was nearly all gone. I could not help but shed some bitter tears, as I stood in front of the glass, but it scalded my raw wounds, and so I ceased weeping.

Pain had lingered in the innermost corner of my heart, but it threatened to engulf me completely. My horribly burned face was partially concealed in layers of bandages and inwardly, I was relieved that Cynthia did not have to witness the terrible state of my injuries. Half of my face looked frighteningly blistered with third degree burns. But my mind experienced a remarkable peacefulness knowing that all the horrors that I endured would eventually pass, now that I was no longer alone and did not have to suffer in seclusion.

Cynthia had left me early the next morning to look for a trusted medical doctor, and I waited inside the building, careful to avoid being sighted by anyone who may have been watching this area.

Then I heard a car pull up and its engine revved and then it was followed by the sound of another vehicle. Too frightened to check out who the newcomers were, I hid deeper in the dark factory building, not making the slightest sound, hoping they were tourists who had lost their way.

But then I heard a shout. It was Cynthia! I hobbled to the crack on the window, and peered outside. Cynthia was there, her arms laden with medical supplies, and she was being flanked by five men. They hollered out my name, and ordered me out. I do not know how they were so certain that I was inside, so I assumed they must have followed her here. Cynthia, unwittingly, had given away the location of my hiding place. The fear of getting captured again, and undergoing those unbearable pain and suffering once more made my blood freeze in anticipation. I felt as though my heart had stopped, and the capacity of breathing became alien to me. My hands shook like a winter leaf as I contemplated the next course of action.

I peered outside again, and saw that the men were shouting at me, waving a submachine gun and threatening to shoot Cynthia if I refused to come out with my hands raised. The threat had its desired effect. I did not wish for Cynthia to get hurt so I clambered out in the open and surrendered myself.

Seconds later, the men rushed at me with raised fists, howling expletives and clobbering my head repeatedly with the handle of the heavy machine gun. I lost balance and collapsed to the ground, praying that the abuse would cease, but they were far from done. They dragged me inside the building and began to pull my mangled limbs up the metal staircase. One of them described how they planned to toss me from the roof. I struggled to escape from their grip, but the efforts were futile. As they dragged me along the rusty stairs, another man strolled in behind them, leading Cynthia along by the arm. I recognized the man as the hotel manager in which Cynthia and I had checked in for our honeymoon. Only three days ago I saw him conversing with Cynthia. Did she know him well? I could not tell, but the smartly dressed man forcibly had Cynthia follow me through the stairs. I stumbled repeatedly, falling twice on my wounded face. The man walking beside Cynthia was taunting me continuously. The assailants pulled me through the corridor and propped me against a

partially boarded window. Cynthia was pleading with the man to let us go, but he laughed hysterically and approached me directly, and stuck me repeatedly.

When Cynthia protested, the man chuckled and said derisively, "Why do you care about this crippled man? What is he to you?" Cynthia replied that she loved me, but upon hearing that, the man became red with anger and with one stroke, he pulled the bandages viciously from my badly burned face.

"Look!" He cried, thrusting my open wounds and burnt jawbone at her. "Look at this ugly and horrible man! You still love him?" He struck me on my left cheek which had large chunks of muscle missing, and I shuddered in hopeless pain. Shame, embarrassment, and sadness infused every fiber of my body.

Unable to utter a sound due to my injured lips, I mutely pleaded for help. After several long minutes of being kicked and spat on, I thought I would surely die from the fresh pangs of agony. Cynthia was gasping. I knew she was frightened to see my terrible condition, and even as I suffered from pain and humiliation, the man continued to taunt me. "Look at him!" He shouted again. "This is not the face of a man. He is a monster!" The man spat at me and cried out, "Do you love monsters, Miss Cynthia?"

Cynthia appeared to be frozen in shock. This was the first time Cynthia had seen the full extent of my wounds and grievously deformed flesh on my face. She was justified in her horror, but before she could react to my plight, the man continued to shout and curse. "Look at this beast pretending to be human. Even his arms are blackened and disgusting." Cynthia recovered from her shock sufficiently and insisted that she loved me regardless. "You love this freak?" The man yelled, shaking me violently. "Look at his pathetic face. Does it even look human to you?"

Cynthia continued to plead and tried to approach me but the man kicked her away from me, and proceeded to rip the sleeves of my shirt, exposing the mangled and blackened flesh of my forearm. I looked pitifully hideous and the man continued to mock, insisting that Cynthia deserves to date a man, and not a freak like me.

I was genuinely confused about why he was putting Cynthia through so much trauma. I attempted to plead and beg the man to stop tormenting us, but only incoherent groans emitted from me. This caused him to laugh and mock me even more. "This freak cannot even speak!" He exclaimed, proceeding to strike me again. I saw how my love and passion were a target for his insults. They scorned and punished me for loving Cynthia, but I was not ashamed for I was unafraid to love.

This time, I fell to the ground and clung on to the metal staircase, scarcely keeping my balance, but he stepped forcefully on my burnt hands, prying the fingers loose, causing me to fall heavily on the floor below. He leaped below and continued to kick me, and finally took out a gun and aimed at me. I knew he intended to shoot me, so I used all my strength to roll towards him, and kicked at his feet. He lost balance and lost the grip on his weapon. I scrambled to my knees and grabbed the gun and held it unsteadily with both hands.

The man saw me with the weapon and began to move closer. I waved the gun, gesturing to him to get away from me. But the man laughed again. "I know all about you, freak!" He sneered. "I know you never kill unarmed men."

I panicked and loaded the gun chamber.

"You won't kill me," the man said. He raised his hand and moved closer towards me. "I know that you will never kill an unarmed man."

"How do you know?" I croaked out, raising the weapon higher, in an attempt to keep him at bay.

"If you shoot me, you will never be able to live with yourself. The guilt will kill you, especially when your beloved Cynthia sees that you are a cold-blooded killer."

I cringed inwardly, as I knew the man was right. I have never shot at anyone who was not holding a weapon. I wanted to believe I could do this, but my hands began to shake, and I lost grip on the weapon.

Seizing my momentary weakness, the man lunged at me and threw me down another flight of filthy staircase.

I grabbed at him as I fell, and my weight caused him to slip and fall over the ledge. I heard a sickening thud, and saw his body sprawl on the clearing of the lower landing. He was no longer stirring, so I assumed he must have been knocked unconscious from the fall. By this time, I felt a lump in my forehead, and realized my head was seriously injured. It began to swell. But I had no energy to call for help, and once more, began to fade away into a mournful sleep. As if from a kilometer away, I caught a glimpse of Cynthia's face peering down, and a stretcher wheeling me away.

I was probably safe. Then everything became blank.

Sub-Rosa Invocation

By the Might that built all in pairs,

I have made a vow unfeigned, and cried-
Amidst my sanctified pavilion in tears,
Unto the Lord Who exercises power far and wide.

My agony is great, my hopes fast decaying,
And silently my life is fading away:
There is a light yonder- faintly shining,
It is my guide; my strength and stay-

Perhaps it is a train speeding to me,
From the end of an eternal tunnel,
Perhaps it will lead to my destiny,
Ending the sojourn of a lonely sentinel...

For there is none to rejoice nor cheer,
None to mourn beside my bier.
I've sought asylum in God's infinite mercy,
And from His hell, now seek immunity.

What was of my past, have I little care,
But on the morrow when I behold my Lord,
I shall don a garb of hope and trifle fear
And along with humankind, kneel and bow.

I nurture dreams within my rallying mind,
And wallow beneath my insignificant hide.
O' Lord of the two Easts and entire humankind
Drown me not in Thy wrath's tide!

I tried to process all the events that were happening around me, the episodes of that fateful day when I arrived at the hospital lingered on my mind. I did not want to admit this even to myself, but after being bound to a filthy metal cot for five days, I had wept like a child begging for mercy, pleading for a quick death. The scars of my ordeal were still etched both visibly on my body, and graphically in my mind. When Cynthia finally recognized me, she took me to a private clinic who in turn transferred me to another hospital that specialized in burns. Doctors were horrified by the extent of my injuries and gave me morphine for the excruciating pain. The burned skin on my face slowly began to fall off, but my cheek was irreparably damaged with third-degree burns and had to be surgically removed. Another month later, I had checked myself into a hospital near Maine and the surgeons insisted I would require skin grafts in the near future, but also warned me that my neck, face, chest and arm would never look the same. Some part of the burned skin began to fall off after two months, but the skin that came in was much pinker than my regular pigment, and I had to wear long-sleeve shirts to conceal it. It has been many years since I had been brutally tortured and burnt, and though I healed, the scars are visible on my face. My lips and cheeks are discolored and deep gashes on my neck are particularly damaged, and even though I underwent several skin grafts, people who meet me for the first time inquire if it is a birthmark.

Cynthia remarked that my eyes are darker now, and my demeanor sadder, but to be truthful, my carefree laughs had died long ago. She nursed me back to health, and my heart swelled in gratitude and pride as she took care of me. Cynthia was certainly a wonderful young woman, and I was lucky to have her in my life. My right elbow was still severely damaged from the burns, and I had immense difficulty in grasping items with the injured hand. Even wearing a shirt became strenuous. But Cynthia was by my side, dressing the injury in face and applying ointment on my skin. I wanted to start working again, but the pain in my elbow became worse. Doctors suggested that the arm would ache more frequently while it healed. After two weeks, I was able to dress myself.

It was also the first time I was able to shave without Cynthia's assistance. I was proud of this small achievement, and spent half-hour using the automatic blade to shave, feeling independent and free for the first time in months.

Doctors prescribed me medications for a perforated stomach. I still had numerous arm and leg fracture, and was suffering from a host of tropical bacteria and disease. My life was full of sad experiences moving my weary body each day closer to the final rest. In the presence of comrades, I try to smile wryly and forget the horrors I experienced, but the pain I felt did not fade away, and I have become condemned to carry that heavy burden of losing dearest comrades and witnessing the suffering of close relatives each day.

During my miserable captivity and torture, I almost forgot the crisis facing Kashmir.

My body was in a dreadful state, as I was still suffering from multiple fractured ribs and numerous lesions. However, I remembered the events that took place only a month ago in the picturesque province of India. Since I could no longer travel physically, I contacted my friends in South East Asia and asked them to do something to end the mass genocide and killing that was taking place in Kashmir. They reported to me that hundreds of mercenaries dressed in Hindu priest garbs were ordered to give speeches claiming that Indian Muslims were taking over the India. Those fake Hindu leaders called upon ordinary Indian citizens to take up arms and kill their Muslim neighbors. This in turn led to further riots and bloodshed. The events in India caused me much heartache and grief. I had personally been to India before, and I saw how Hindus and Muslims lived in harmonious communities and respected each other. Minor skirmishes between the two groups occasionally happened but it was not of any significant scale, as members of communities sometime disagree on issues, but paid reporters and digital media only gave coverage to the mercenary imposters. My friends spoke with several Hindu residents and they expressed great hope for the future of their country and independent local correspondents said they admired the diversity India has. I was impressed by how they lived their lives in unity and prosperity and earnestly wished that peace would be restored soon.

But all this changed when a group of skilled mercenaries gifted in the art of subterfuge decided to deceive the innocent population of Kashmir, and incited a genocide. Since the riots began in 1990, hundreds of families fled from Indian-administered Kashmir and ended up as refugees in developed countries and when they told their tales, and recounted their lived experience. From the point of view of ordinary victims, they had suffered from ethnic violence. They did not know the people who were hurting them were paid mercenaries whose only job was to dress in Indian clothes and incite mass riot and genocide.

The events that were depicted in the news and later, in Indian films, were largely incorrect, as those people never knew the truth about the foreign mercenaries. Indian nationals had no idea that the entire Kashmir fiasco was being engineered by a group of blood-thirsty mercenaries who posed as Muslim clerics and Hindu pandits in order to make the two factions battle with one another. The facts of what took place appeared to have been suppressed by a conspiracy of silence, but I could not wallow on the particulars of this incident for very long, because another war was breaking out in a neighboring country.

I knew Richard was disapproving of Cynthia's relationship with me, and he made his displeasure very obvious after we got engaged, and he told me several times that Cynthia would never want to spend the rest of her life with a Russian boy. Richard stringently advised me to move on with my life and take another girlfriend. I told Richard I loved Cynthia and no other woman could make me happy. After having this conversation, I returned to my small house and waited for Cynthia to join me for a small home dinner which I cooked myself. Cynthia was delighted to see me, and she had brought along gifts. It was a rare bottle of wine, and was of a prominent dark-skinned grape variety and I knew that it was the main constituent of the Bordeaux blend in the revered communes of Pauillac. I was wondering how she purchased such an expensive wine, and Cynthia cheerfully stated that her father gave this to her as our engagement gift. I was very humbled and grateful to hear this, especially because Richard did not initially seem very pleased to hear about our engagement and repeatedly asked me to leave his daughter alone. I was glad he showed such a remarkable gesture of accepting us as a couple.

Soon after tasting the fine wine, we became drowsy. I felt unnaturally tired and dropped on the bed and lost consciousness. Cynthia was already deep asleep. When I awoke, the room was dimly lit, and I was lying on my back. My eyes were open but I could not move. Fear bubbled in my heart as I realized that my body was paralyzed. I made a tremendous effort to move my hand but it felt as heavy as a block of stone. My legs lay uselessly before me. I was unable to move my toes even the fraction of an inch. What was going on? I was starting to panic, and then moving my eyeballs, I glanced to my left. Cynthia lay motionless beside me. Her eyes were wide open, but from the horror I saw in her eyes, I realized that she too was being unable to move. What had happened to us? Why were we paralyzed? My chest constricted with fear as I wondered what was happening. Just then, three shadow figure came into view. They stood by the bedside. I could see them clearly. Three men wearing casual parka and baseball caps, with hard eyes. One of them grinned mercilessly at me. I did not recognize them, but they looked like seasoned criminals, and judging from the numerous tattoos on their knuckles, and face, I assumed they had been recently released from prison.

At once, the worst thoughts flashed through my mind. I was afraid they would kill Cynthia and myself. I felt utterly helpless, unable to move or speak. The men were very tall and fat and continued to leer at me, and I could do nothing to protect my beloved Cynthia. I was at a loss as to what they wanted. The conmen were likely burglars, but there was nothing of value belonging to either of us in this small house. I closed my eyes, hoping this was all a bad dream and the intruders would be gone. But then, I felt someone slamming against me. My eyes flew open, and I saw one of the heavyset men kneeling on my chest, nearly crushing my ribcage and grabbing my thighs. I gasped in pain from the convulsive grip of his fingers. I tried to scream but no sound came from my paralyzed throat muscles. I gasped in pain, as the man ripped off my sleeping clothes, tearing my pajamas into two pieces. Then he pinned me down, and began to assault me. Cynthia looked on helplessly as the three men took turns abusing me, slapping my body most humiliatingly. I burned in shame and anger. I had never been sexually assaulted in front of a woman, and I felt terribly helpless because I was paralyzed under the influence of some chemical. I wanted to scream and shout, but some sort of drug prevented me from making a sound, and I could not even cry. There was severe anguish and sorrow brimming in my heart. I realized my heart was full in drawing to an end; but when I could not utter a word of protest. Water sprang to my eyelids and my tears had their way, trickling down the corner of my eyes, soaking the pillow, betraying my shame and pain to the world.

The criminals were merciless in their assault and abused me endlessly. Tears trickled down my cheeks as silent sobs wracked my body. Why are they doing this?! I cried these words in silence. Why are they tormenting me? I fought to utter an audible prayer, but I was akin to a dead man, unable to move or speak. God have mercy on me and crush these monsters to the darkest pit of hell! I uttered over and over in my head.

After several hours, I began to feel a tingling sensation in my fingertips, and the abusers noticed this and they abruptly left, and taking all my clothes with them.

After twenty minutes, my body became mobile and I was able to sit up. Slowly, I awoke from the dazed state and felt a burning emptiness inside, realizing that I had no one to turn to. Cynthia was stirring as well, and I hurriedly searched for my clothing, but it was all gone, so I wrapped a blanket around my waist and ran outside. I don't know why I ran into the freezing night, but all I could think of was that I wanted revenge. I wanted to destroy those men who entered my home and assaulted me. I wanted to find out why or how they had drugged me and abused me in front of my beloved Cynthia.

I ran up and down the street, but there was no sign of them. The men had left. The roads were deserted. I collapsed to the ground and wept like a child. Never before had I faced such disregard from another human being. I wanted to sit in the freezing road, until my skin froze and I became so numb that my body would not feel such desperate pain and shame. I wanted to forget the terror and assault of this night and die quickly.

My wishes did not come true. Cynthia had noticed my erratic behavior and she brought me inside the house. However, she did not speak to me, and behaved very cold towards me. I asked her why she was so angry. Cynthia suddenly shouted, and said I was a lecherous, deviant and sick man, because I entertained other men even while I was in bed next to her. I did not understand what Cynthia was implying, but moments later, it all made sense. Cynthia insisted that I had carried out consensual sexual activity with the three men. I pleaded with her and said I was paralyzed and could not move, but Cynthia did not believe me. She thought I was a willing participant, and threatened to leave me forever. I cried and pleaded, but nothing helped. I was still shivering from the cold, so Cynthia prepared to fix me a warm drink and my eyes fell on the bottle of wine Richard had gifted her the day before. I caught a whiff of choline, a commonly used neuromuscular toxin and can cause temporary paralysis.

Finally, everything made sense. Someone had spiked our drinks with the drug in order to make the two of us partially paralyzed. The criminals who raided this house while we were asleep had been hired by the same person who poisoned our drinks. I vowed to find out the man responsible for orchestrating such a degrading criminal act.

The vile men got away after assaulting me and I could not hurt them or stop them. I wished each one of these men suffered in hunger and thirst until their dying breath. They did not deserve to be a part of the human race, and I hoped they all remained forever childless and poor, with the flames of hell consuming their soul before they even began to die. Oh, how I cursed them so that they would be tortured to death and get hounded by the fiercest beasts of the land and deadliest fishes of the sea.

The next week, Cynthia and I rented a cottage for the weekend. It was in the middle of a small town in Utah, where I was sure that no one would find us or hurt us. I slept that night feeling safe and peaceful. There won't be any prowlers around. None of my enemies knew about this location.

Before retiring to bed the next day, Cynthia expressed a desire to sample Utah steaks, so we went to a local steak house and ordered traditional a southern meal. It was scrumptious dinner. We returned to the cottage and were too tired to undress. I fell into a deep dreamless slumber. However, my happiness was short lived.

Someone had broken in the small cottage and attacked me again that night. Like the previous occasion when three prison escapees had assaulted me all night, this time the men made sure Cynthia was awake before they began their disgraceful act. I felt utterly helpless, being unable to move an inch and defend myself from their dirty hands. The same paralysis inducing drugs was swimming in my bloodstream, and from the corner of my eyes, I saw Cynthia was in the same condition as I was. Her eyes flashed with fright but she could not utter a sound nor move. This torment went on and on until I could no longer consciously feel the brutalities of their assault. The mind had a strange way of blotting out the impossible pains, and it seemed as though my brain was slowly withdrawing itself from my own body. I wanted this torment to end. I wished earnestly that these men would kill me. I hoped they would slit my throat. But none of my wishes ever came true. I did not want to get out of this numbness and feel the pain and shame anew.

I trembled in rage and horror, but the muscles of my body refused to move.

I felt as though I was left stranded in the darkest region of a no-man's land, destined to suffer in shame and fear. I did not feel as though I belonged in my own body. This must have been a terror meant for an uncreated world which was beyond the capacity for any words to describe or language to justify. The men abusing me continued to defile my body in full view of Cynthia, who was forced to look on with horror. She could not move any more than I could, for we both had consumed something that had poisoned us and rendered us paralyzed.

My passionate protests made no impact on their conscience for I screamed in silence.

How could it be that my frantic and voiceless prayers remained unanswerable? As soon as the tightness of my chest eased, I moved, first a few centimeters and then pulled my torso into a sitting position. My frustration and rage made me howl and collapse to the wooden floor.

I knew this barrage of assaults and attacks would likely continue, so I devised a plot to protect myself. My dear friend Dustin created a special gadget for me, that worked like a padlock. He fitted it to my clothes so that only I would be able to undress by pressing the right code. Strangers would not be able to attack me as long as I wore this.

The next day, I fastened the belt of my trousers before going to bed, and rotated the lock three times. I found comfort in knowing that this item of clothing had cut-resistant straps and webbing and a unique locking device that ensured that the pants could not be pulled down. I was safe. For now.

It was after eleven weeks that I finally identified the criminals who had assaulted me in Utah. Dustin had employed a global recognition application to track down the men. I positively identified them from their prison mugshots and confirmed their identities by their tattoos. I discovered that they had been lifers in a Super-Max prison in Indiana. They were missing from their cells the night I was attacked. But it took me another four years to get the necessary permission to view the security surveillance camera films from the prison warden's office. When Dustin finally got a copy of the video, I watched it several times to make sure I was not mistaken. After scouring hours of footages from prison cameras, I finally saw that a familiar looking car pull up to the prison gates and in the brightly lit guard house, I saw the face of the man clearly. It was Richard. The camera showed that he spent five minutes conversing with the guards and handing them thick wads of dollar bills, while waiting inside the barbed wire fence, and finally three heavily tattooed prisoners marched out and entered the back of Richard's car. The time stamp on the video showed it was exactly midnight. The date was the day I was first attacked by these three men in my own bed. I honestly did not want to believe Richard was personally responsible for hiring those criminals to attack me, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. He did offer Cynthia the special wine which was spiked with paralysis drugs. He knew we would both be incapacitated and incapable of defending ourselves against those hardened American criminals.

I had to be certain who the criminals were so I tracked them down one by one. The man with numerous tattoos was registered to a single unit house in the outskirts of Utah's West Desert, approximately a hundred kilometers west of Salt Lake City. I rented a car and sped through the deserted highways in order to confront the man and demand an explanation for why he broke into my cottage the previous month. When I arrived at the small house, I found it deserted. However, the front door was ajar. I entered cautiously and recoiled from the putrid smell of death and decay. Inside, the body of a man lay on the carpeted floor. The rotting flesh was crawling with insects and the face was only partially intact. From the tattoos of the man's forehead, and elbows, I recognized him as the man who had attacked me in the cottage and assaulted me in front of Cynthia. Temporary despair clouded my senses, as I lamented the fact that this man would never be able to tell me who hired him and why he chose to attack me in Cynthia's presence. Initially, I could not identify the cause of his death, but on closer inspection, I noticed a shotgun nearby. The man had shot himself! The gun lay at an awkward angle. I found it difficult to imagine someone aiming the long double-barreled gun at his own chest. This looked more like a murder than a suicide, but I was not an expert, so I contacted the police department at Salt Lake City and reported my findings.

The police promised to investigate the death of this former inmate, and I continued to mourn the loss of my only witness. Now I had no physical evidence or lead to find out more details about who had attacked me.

The kaleidoscope of my daily dose of horrors were becoming unbearable and I no longer wanted to play a part in this life of guilt and agony.

After several months, Cynthia and I visited couple's therapy and tried to forget about what ordeal we faced in Utah. On his request, we went to pay our respects and greetings to Richard for his birthday party. Although Richard was a round, loquacious little man in his late sixties, he was full of energy and wanted desperately to dance with his daughter. Cynthia however, refused. She had been upset with her father ever since she suspected that he may have been responsible for poisoning the wine with paralysis drugs. I tried to coax her into giving Richard the benefit of doubt. It was possible he did not know about the chemicals in the wine bottle. He may have accidentally poisoned it. I reminded Cynthia how her father had treated me with great generosity and often invited me to stay for a glass of beer. The Austrian-Hungarian man was ultra-hospitable, and I found it very difficult to believe that he had intentionally poisoned us to induce temporary paralysis and sent criminals to assault me in front of Cynthia. Richard may have been an over-protective father, but stooping so low was beneath him. The entire night, Cynthia continued to dance with other men, so I finally spoke to her, begging her to give Richard one dance which he desperately desired. Cynthia shouted and protested saying she hated her father, but eventually she gave in and listened to my request. Richard was overjoyed when I led Cynthia to his seat and he was able to waltz with his daughter. That evening, we exchanged compunctious farewells and returned to our apartment.

After the United States elected a new president in 1992, Richard chose a new target. He decided to arm terrorist groups inside Serbia and ordered them to attack, rape and murder innocent Bosnian Moslems. In 1995, Richard ordered the Serbian President to make his soldiers rape and kill all Bosnians Moslem and exterminate all Moslems in Europe. He wanted to create a new government like the Nazis, and hired twelve Serbian generals as his personal agents. They were paid millions of dollars to start a massacre in Sarajevo. When I heard about this massacre, I tried to go to Serbia and put a stop to the killings, but Richard immediately ordered those Serb generals to attack Albania and kill all European ethnic Moslems there. I was lucky to be Russian, because when I went to Serbia, I was captured by the Serb forces, but they released me because I was a Russian ally. The Serbians treated me well and put me on a plane. I returned to the United States and told Richard that Serbians are good people, and that even though I hated their crimes, I loved them as a people. Richard became very angry to see that I loved the Serbs, so he immediately went to meet with the House of Representatives and told them they had to attack and kill all Serbians immediately. Richard then paid one billion dollars to the American Secretary of State and made them join NATO forces and bomb Serbia.

Richard and his Italian mercenaries evaded capture by the FBI, because they had friends in the upper echelons of the CIA. However, the Federal'naya Agenstvo Pravitel'stvennoy Svayazi i Informatsii was a very professional intelligence gathering organization. So, the Russian FAPSI tracked some of his mercenaries down and found out about the Italian mafia man and they tracked several of his criminal headquarters. Russia then sent a team of FSB operatives to stop the Italian man from detonating any other bombs in America. Those Russian special agents located a safehouse in California, but before they could stop the criminals, the Italian man and his American employees shot and killed those agents to death. The Kremlin ordered an investigation and discovered that the Italian man was responsible for the death of those Russian agents. However, the naval commander and his German friend did not want Moscow to target them, so they immediately began to frame all those attacks on the Saudi Arabian royal family as well as Emirati princes. He leaked information to the Russian government and gave them copies of fake bank reports, that showed Arab leaders hiring assassins to execute the FSB officers in Los Angeles.

I remember that during that entire time period, Richard was very busy, and he was very excited to see how the American hostages were doing. One afternoon, I entered his office to give him a report of my work, when I heard him speaking on the phone to someone, and ordering him to execute two American hostages in Iran. I was surprised to hear this! Why was Richard ordering hijackers in Tehran to kill Americans? I immediately left the office, and began to monitor all of Richard's activities. I later found out that he was personally responsible for orchestrating the entire attack on the American embassy in Tehran. He also ordered his mercenaries to use a surface-to-air missile to destroy the American rescue helicopter. However, at that time, no one suspected that Richard was the mastermind of the entire attack, and American citizens continued to believe that Iranian Revolutionary Guards were behind the entire fiasco.

It was in the year 1985 that something happened that made me overjoyed. On one of my visits to New Jersey, I noticed that the elegant Russian woman who had been wishing for a child for so many years finally gave birth to her first child. It was a tiny boy. I felt as though the baby was something like a little brother to me. During the following months, whenever I was around that area for something always made time to stop by and sometimes take some pictures of the baby if I had my camera on hand and see how fast the baby boy was

growing. It was in one of these visits that I saw another woman in the house, who appeared to have rented the second floor of the family's huge villa.

A tall thin woman with flaming red hair was living in the same house as the couple. It seemed strange to me that an unrelated female would stay rented in the residence of a young couple who had just had a child. I visited regularly around their home for a week to observe what was transpiring and I noticed that the Russian woman's Indian husband appeared to be having a sort of an affair with the thin white woman. I wondered where she came from so I followed the red-haired woman to her work place one day. I saw her entering a nondescript building in the city of Newark. She entered using a secure key card and proceeded to meet with a number of men. I discovered her name. Julie Shriver.

Using this information, I ran a background check on her. Shriver was an active duty CIA officer who had served as a field operative in China for three years and was working undercover at this insurance company; a term I knew secret agencies used to hide their financial transactions. I wondered what an active CIA officer was doing by renting in the Russian woman's house. Was it perfectly natural for an accomplished intelligence officer to quit her post in Beijing and spend all day cooped inside a small suburban house with a housewife and her child, and try so desperately to have an affair with her husband? I continued observing and noticed the mother figure that I had looked up to for so many years was at the brink of death. Twice, the Russian woman was rushed to the emergency in public ambulance. I spoke to one of the doctors who complained that the woman's health was deteriorating due to an infection after childbirth, and her mental health was affecting her speed of recovery and if not treated properly she might die very soon of anxiety related illness. I was distraught with fatigue after seeing all this. I felt so guilty and helpless, but during the beginning of the next year, I received a distressing news.

April, 1986 CHERNOBYL:

My life during this year was remarkably pleasant, because I was able to build a respectful relationship with Richard, and he permitted me to meet and speak with Cynthia once every week. Cynthia's stepfather, who insisted on pretending to be her real biological father, was a powerful man, with high-ranking contacts in both Europe and America. Richard had a firm foothold in the National Security Agency, which was unofficially the surveillance department of the Pentagon. NSA in turn had numerous subdivisions, including departments managed by black budget programs. I served him faithfully, believing he was going to make our world a safer and better place.

Many months after the radioactive incident in Chernobyl, I accompanied the American military crew and flew aboard the nuke-sniffing aircraft which was capable of detecting fissure material from high above. The US Air Force operated the WC-135W nuke-sniffer, in order to screen the air for nuclear material such as that created by nuclear weapon tests or disasters. The nuke-detecting planes were not only used for enforcing the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, signed in 1963, but also to assess damage from notorious nuclear disasters. I was soberly seated on the front row, as the jet scouted over the nuclear disaster in what we still knew as the USSR. However, a strange phenomenon caught my attention. I had gleaned solid evidence that the accident was not a radiation spill out caused by irresponsible Soviet engineers.

To many people around the world, something seemed bizarre about the whole episode and several Politburo members told me they suspected an American based organization launched a nuclear bomb at USSR, but the military was alerted in time to launch anti-missile projectiles, which garbled the reading of the original trajectory, and forced the missile to collapse far away from Moscow. Unfortunately, Chernobyl became the victim of the nuclear bomb. For weeks, fire from the explosion deluged the surrounding towns, while a lethal cloud of radioactive material gathered over the Ukrainian city. It was a disaster of epic proportion, but in order to avoid a global scandal and unanswered questions, the Soviet government leaked a news stating that there had been an unavoidable accident at the fourth reactor of Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. I was tasked with collecting more evidence about who may have been responsible for launching the nuclear bomb. The Pentagon was not involved, and neither the CIA or the State Department had any clue about the incident, but the only person who might have known about this was Richard. I began my investigation discreetly, studying every money transaction which Richard had authorized and re-reading each message he transmitted to his freelance mercenaries. Throughout my report, I was unnerved to see the Chernobyl nuclear attack site was being referred to as a maximum severity or Level 7 nuclear energy accidents. Newspapers around the world were told the Soviet authorities had conducted a routine test at this power plant, causing two massive explosions which blew the heavy roof off one of the plant's reactors, releasing toxic amount of radiation in the air. Soviet experts estimated that the Chernobyl area was inundated with five hundred time more radiation than the atomic bomb Americans had dropped on Hiroshima during the end of World War Two.

Officially, the United States government denied any responsibility for the attack. They insisted that the military never launched any nuclear-tipped warhead at the Soviet Union and nor did the president authorize the use of such weapon against any country in the world. However, this was the first time in history that the USSR became a victim of a nuclear attack, but since no country claimed responsibility

for the attack, there could be no retaliation, and instead of taking revenge of the rogue American intelligence services who were responsible for the attack, the Soviet government took steps to remove civilians from the area to minimize their radiation exposure, and mobilized specially trained troops to fight the blaze around Chernobyl. For thirteen days, Soviet workers furiously shoveled contaminated debris off the roads and tried to extinguish all the fires by spraying water, sand, lead and nitrogen over affected areas.

I was accompanied by two nuclear engineers from the Soviet Far East who worked at Chernobyl station. They all had top-secret clearance and were one of the ten people in the world who knew the truth about what happened to USSR on April, 1986. They were aware that the nuclear warhead that was detonated over Chernobyl had been heading for Moscow, but Soviet defense mechanisms that were in place prevented the projectile to reach the intended target. The fortieth president of the United States had come to power only five years ago, but he was a good man, and fully cooperated with the Soviet leader in trying to unearth the true culprit behind the nuclear attack. Hours before the launch of the atomic bomb, the American president's personal launch codes were stolen. It was presumed to be missing, but five secret service operatives were later suspended after being suspected of misplacing the small doomsday briefcase which was meant to be in the president's hand at all times. Joint investigation conducted by the Pentagon, the United States Military Intelligence and the GRU concluded a common explanation in their reports. It was believed that an unnamed official at the NSA black budget division had used the president's personal launch code to fire a nuclear-tipped warhead towards Moscow. It would be only after a decade that I found out that the unnamed NSA covert operation director who launched the nuclear missile at the USSR was none other than Richard. Cynthia's stepfather was determined to destroy my country after I spent several weeks in Moscow. It was shortly before Christmas time, when the Russian woman and her Indian husband had their first child. It was a beautiful baby boy who was born in October of 1985. I participated in the gender-reveal party as well as the baby showers, and soon after the delivery, the Russian woman took her child to her homeland to allow her relatives in the Soviet Union to meet the lovely infant. I did not want to miss this familial opportunity and accompanied her in the journey. Her first stop was in Soviet Byelorussia where her cousin resided and from there, she took the child and met her uncle in Soviet Kazakhstan. Finally, the small family went to Moscow to introduce the baby boy to his grandfather, a aristocratic looking Muscovite, who lived in a grand villa a short walk from Moscow's central square. He was remarkably brilliant and athletic man who skied, played tennis and wrote poetry in his spare time. I was in awe of the Russian woman's father, and was certain that he was the most affectionate man I had ever met. This trip was memorable but it came to an end after one month. On the first week of February, 1986, I returned from Moscow and scheduled an appointment to meet with Richard and apologize for my absence. He invited me to dinner in his mansion. The dinner with Richard was always a long, full-course affair, during which the NSA black ops director would reminisce about his days as a spy in Germany and Austria, and gossiped about his wealth and art collection. This day, Richard, heavily under the influence of alcohol but I took the time to explain how I was away in the USSR and spent a memorable time with the Russian woman's family members there. Richard expressed interest and wanted to know all the small details of my journey, asking questions about the security in the Soviet capital. I told as much as I could remember. As I spoke, Richard leaned back in his chair, legs crossed, and listened attentively. His face wore an interested, smoothly amiable expression and I was genuinely pleased that he was showing so much concern and respect towards me. I happily filled him on all the steps of this journey and promised to take him to Moscow with me if he ever wished to go. Upon hearing this, Richard gave out a sinister laugh. In his lisping Austrian accent, Richard declared that after one month, there would not be any place to visit in Moscow because the USSR would be reduced to nuclear wasteland. I could not stop the deep frown enveloping my face, but then I imagined that Richard must have been joking. He was after all an elderly Austrian-Hungarian man and I did not understand their sense of humor all the time. I ignored his outburst and returned to Cynthia's house, feeling content with the result of my meeting with Richard. I was certain he was not angry with me, and had forgiven me for taking one month of absence from his duties.

One month and ten days later, the deputy director of USSR's Nuclear Energy Institute sent me a coded message, asking me to fly to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic at once. Something terrible had happened which he was forbidden from transmitting in message form. After receiving the urgent summons from Moscow, I wasted no time and headed to the USSR.

When I first arrived in Moscow to find out details about the attack, Colonel Dutolov briefed me on the severity of the situation in Chernobyl and said that at least fifty square miles of the surrounding area will remain uninhabitable for the next hundred years. The toxicity in the air and in the soil was too serious for any life to survive, as the bomb that was detonated. In addition to being the commander of a military laboratory in Siberia, Colonel Dutolov was a professor at the Moscow Engineering and Physics Institute, and with sadness gleaming from his gray eyes, he expressed relief that the bomb detonated over an unpopulated area, but warned me that the USSR may not be so lucky next time.

Among the evidence I collected for my country were the pictures of ruins over the disaster site. I saw a casing of several shells, inside containers which looked like metal lined trucks. I recognized those items. They were typical missile launchers used to detonate nuclear capable missiles over enemy territory. The devastation and death on the ground broke my heart. I could not believe so many

innocent people had suffered such an agonizing death! I pressed the palms of my hand to my face and tried to choke back the tears threatening to spill over, hoping no one else in the aircraft noticed my emotions. By this time, I knew that the accident in Chernobyl was not an accidental spill at a nuclear plant, but it was a deliberate detonation of a nuclear weapon targeted directly at the Soviet Union. Moscow was aware of this attack by now, and they decided to minimize radioactive pollution near the facility, and cut down trees of more than three square kilometers and buried the dangerous waste underground to protect the surrounding air. However, the Soviet government decided against letting the world media know that they had become victims of a deliberate nuclear attack, because it would show the world that we were vulnerable and weak, and very susceptible to nuclear, biological and chemical attacks.

Shortly after the nuclear attack, local firefighters flooded the neighboring town of Pripjat with nitrogenated water to reduce radiation effects on the innocent civilian population. Hundreds of trucks also cleaned the streets with treated foam, to minimize effects from the disaster unfolding miles away in Chernobyl. Within hours of the nuclear attack, the Soviet government mobilized twenty thousand specially trained troops to help fight the blaze. Hundreds were dropped from helicopters to spray treated foam on the rooftop of the residences that were hit, and others began to furiously shovel debris off the roads and buildings. They rigorously sprayed water on the exposed energy reactors and power lines. However, it was a costly and delicate operation because of the lethal level of radiation in the air. A fully suited worker could survive in the radiation for only five minutes, so the Soviet disaster management authorities picked up workers after they worked for five minutes and replaced them with other men. This way, they rotated workers, so that for twenty-four hours, there were twenty thousand Soviet workers battling the blaze and containing the radiation.

The workers who sprayed a small section of the roads with sand, nitrogen and lead were airlifted within minutes to minimize their radiation exposure. For three weeks, tens of thousands of men worked tirelessly, risking their lives to protect the people in the adjacent areas, making sure the residents of Kiev and modern-day Ukraine were protected from all harmful effects of the nuclear radiation. But the detonation of the nuclear warhead released a large quantity of radioactive substances, including iodine-131, cesium-137, plutonium and strontium-90, into the air for over a period of fifteen days, so despite wearing special suits, most of the Soviet firefighters who helped battle the fires were exposed to some degrees of the nuclear radiation and weeks later, many of those brave firefighters had died from excessive exposure.

The nuclear attack on the USSR devastated me. After observing the horrifying terrain and ruined buildings in Chernobyl, I shuddered in horror to think what may have happened if the nuclear weapon had landed on the intended target. Millions of innocent civilians in Moscow and neighboring cities would have died instantly while many more would have suffered from deadly after effects of the radiation. Of course, I did not know Richard was involved in the attack, because he always told me how desperately he wished and prayed for world peace. But the lingering fear of future woes inundated my mind. How was I to know what terrible events may be slumbering in the background of time? What if the future years offered me greater pains and suffering? How many more of my dear friends and comrades shall I lose? My tears flooded my eyes, as the volumes of the showering clouds overcame my vision, and I felt my senses fading away.

I was well acquainted with Kurt Hausser, the deputy director of Clandestine Operations of the CIA, who often visited Richard in his Washington office. One weekend, Kurt Hausser told me that the Senate Intelligence Committee had decided to decommission the NSA black ops program and cancel all their contracts with Richard and cancel all operations in League 13. They believed his department was irrelevant to National Security of America and wanted to use the funding on local law enforcement agencies. I was shocked to hear that the United States government was planning to cancel the NSA black ops division which Richard had worked so hard to build, so I begged the CIA senior official to reconsider this decision. Kurt said it was not his decision, but the Senators had decided to cancel League 13. The only way they might reconsider their decision was if there were honest employees who would testify in Richard's favor. I immediately volunteered to sit in the hearing and tell all the American senators how useful the NSA black budget program was to world security. I also told them that Richard was an honorable man who used these undercover programs to save millions of lives, and then I gave them details about my mission in the Middle East, Europe and South America where I helped Richard save people. The Senate Committee finally agreed with my pleadings and they allowed Richard to continue his great work. During that time, I genuinely thought he was doing a lot of good in this world. I had no clue that the recent disaster in my homeland was a direct result of my actions! By interceding on his behalf, I made the Americans keep him in power, and in this way, I had enabled him to remain in a position of power and carry out these terrible crimes against humanity for so many years. Oh, if only I had known! If only I was wiser and more sensible! But I was a young boy, barely out of his teen, hopelessly in love with a beautiful woman whose kind father had offered me unconditional love, employment and a home. I did not think it was possible that Richard was a cruel man. I never believed he was capable of carrying out massive attacks on civilians populations.

I flew back to Washington D.C. to back-trace the source of the launch and locate the military base where the nuclear weapon was launched. For this task, I employed the help of my dear friend Dustin, who used one of his unmanned drone cameras to take aerial photographs of several possible air bases which had the aircrafts capable of dropping nuclear-tipped warheads. One of the locations I suspected was an aircraft boneyard in Arizona. The pictures Dustin gave me showed thousands of defunct airplanes laid out at the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group. I studied the reports carefully. More than six thousand aircraft were housed on the Davis–Monthan Air Force Base across three thousand acres in Tucson, Arizona. I knew that it was the largest storage and preservation facility for aircraft in the world, with cargo planes and giant bombers that functioned perfectly well, but were kept in this location for possible refurbishments and minor repairs. The logic behind using the Arizona air field made sense, for if an aircraft went missing from this yard, there would be no records or investigations to search and account for it.

I personally flew to Arizona and after painstakingly searching for clues, Dustin and I identified the aircraft that was used to load the nuclear missile which was launched at Moscow. The rental papers for the aircraft were registered to a man named *Reinhard*. I knew it was Richard's original name before he moved to the United States, but I had to be certain. Inside the folder, a small scrawling signature appeared legible at the dotted line. I carefully dusted off the fingerprints from the page and asked Dustin to produce the result.

It was a perfect match with Richard!

The last day of the week was revolutionary for me, because I continued to do research and find out how a way to save the Russian woman's marriage. I followed Shriver to her undercover Agency office and saw a familiar face having a lengthy conversation with her. The elderly man was none other than the former director of the NSA's secret black ops program, my long-time employer; Cynthia's father. Officially curious now, I called my computer expert friend Dustin and told him to find out everything he could about the red-haired woman. Dustin got back to me the next day to tell me he found a significant sum of money in Shriver's bank account. One of the checks she had cashed in was directly from Cynthia's father. I couldn't fathom why Cynthia's father would be paying a young female CIA operative so much money.

Julie Shriver was being paid handsomely for her activities. There was nothing significant about her besides the fact that she was actively involved in wrecking the beautiful Russian woman's marriage. It angered me to see the woman, whom I considered almost like a mother, in so much misery. The worst part was that the lady had become good friends with her tenant, as she helped out the family with everything, including voluntarily babysitting the firstborn child every day, and continually helping the husband out with his work projects and PhD papers. She had absolutely no clue as to why so suddenly after one year of taking in this tenant, her husband moved out and was preparing for a divorce.

The wife just gave birth to her second child and was once more hospitalized. Her husband was now temporarily separated and began to spend more time with the red-haired CIA operative. I didn't know if he was merely separated from the wife or had applied for divorce. The woman who I considered to be my second mother was in the emergency ward of the local hospital, gravely ill. Despite engaging in an affair, her husband remained at her bedside and looked after her, but the Russian woman was still sad. From the couple's interaction, I knew they still loved one another, and I earnestly wished they would reconcile. If only the other woman agreed to leave the wonderful family alone.

I wanted to help save their marriage and began to brainstorm the best way to bring it about. I had Dustin research Shriver's background and found out she had been engaged to a man while conducting secret operations in China in 1984, while being undercover as a school teacher. I reached out to Shriver's fiancé and asked him to move to the United States. I managed to secure a job for him in New Jersey, near Julie Shriver's office. Dustin had already called her and threatened to inform the IRS about her illegal monetary transactions and she quickly realized that the truth would eventually be exposed to everyone.

A month later, the man arrived in America. I implored him to meet his fiancée and convince her to move in with him. I believed the woman would leave the couple alone and move on with her own life. It took several months for my plan to work. Eventually, one day, the red-haired CIA operative left the couple's house for the last time. She married her fiancé a week later. And the husband moved back in.

The young couple I had come to see as my surrogate family survived the onslaught and became amiable again. In the course of the next five years, the Russian woman had several more children, the last one dying in infancy. I marveled at how happy the family was. With six children in tow, they traveled to many countries including India, Japan, Germany, Dubai, Malaysia and England. It was an amazing thought for me to know I had helped save their marriage and future.

I was content with the way my life was going. Cynthia was happy to be with me but I hoped to be tied to her permanently. I hinted marriage whenever we were together, but Cynthia would always falter at the thought. She knew her father did not approve of me. I wanted to elope, run away to some place far away but Cynthia didn't want to disappoint her father. She invited me to another family

engagement however. A birthday celebration for the former director of the NSA. It was to take place in another of his vast estates in Europe. I agreed to attend his sixtieth birthday party, hoping to set a positive image of myself to Cynthia's family.

When I arrived in Vienna, the house that I was directed to seemed to belong to ancient kings. It was a massive stone mansion complete with picnic yards and swimming pool. Upon my arrival, Cynthia's father set down the ground rules for me. No unmarried couples would be permitted to share a room. I thought it was ridiculous, knowing how long Cynthia and I have known one another. The old man, however, was adamant. This time, I refused to play by his rules and I convinced Cynthia to slip out at night to book a room at a nearby motel. We returned to the mansion early in the morning but when I saw Cynthia's father standing in the lobby, his face dark with anger, I knew that had discovered our tryst.

Personally, I didn't care anymore what he thought about us. But he scolded us for disobeying his orders and forbade Cynthia from speaking to me again. He also told me to leave his house immediately. I felt affronted. It was humiliating to be treated so poorly, especially in front of the woman I loved. There was no use in arguing so I grabbed my suitcase and moved into the motel for the remainder of my stay in Austria.

For breakfast the next morning, I went to a small restaurant adjacent to the motel. An elderly gentleman recognized me. He had seen me at the birthday party in Cynthia's mansion and wanted to know what I was doing in this country. I told him about my relationship with the former NSA director's daughter and expressed hope of getting married soon. As soon as I said those words, the old man gasped and became disoriented. He warned me to stay away from that family and told me unimaginable facts about Cynthia's father.

The old man said he was a Polish Jew who had migrated to America in the '60s and had come with the sole intention of bringing the NSA's director to justice. According to him, Cynthia's father was a notorious white-collar criminal who was famous for executing elderly prisoners at a concentration camp.

Authorities never charged Cynthia's father for his involvement in the atrocities at the prison site. The man found safe haven on American soil after he cut a deal with the United States government and was granted sanctuary within the Intelligence services. He climbed ranks with astronomical speed and was made the chief of the National Security Agency. NSA files kept his criminal past hidden from public data. When I heard of his dangerous past, I went to meet Cynthia and asked her to confront her father. She vehemently rejected my assertion about her father's criminal past. He had apparently told her that he was a victim at Buchenwald, not a perpetrator, and that somehow, the old man who met me in the Vienna restaurant was mistaken and confused him with another man.

I almost believed his excuses but decided to meet with a local journalist who had worked for OÖN, a German language newspaper based in Linz that had been founded by the U.S. troops who had occupied Austria soon after World War Two. I went to meet the journalist in his house. He lived in a dilapidated apartment by himself. And was crippled. During our meeting, I asked him how he had lost the mobility of his legs and right arm. He told me that during the late 80s, he had penned an article exposing the name of Cynthia's father as a white-collar criminal. The journalist also told me how his years of research yielded positive results in that there was no doubt as to the former NSA director's guilt. Although I was not fond of Cynthia's father, I still considered placing the good-natured old man within the pantheon of war criminals to be farfetched.

I wanted to see the proof he had collected but he was reluctant to trust me. I showed him the picture of Cynthia's mother, Ekaterina. The journalist shuddered visibly when he saw the black and white image. He said Cynthia's father was a monster in disguise who had allegedly tried to kill Ekaterina and later banished her into a mental asylum in Finland. He thereafter raised his daughter alone and was exceedingly possessive about her. Before I departed his humble lodgings, the journalist whispered to me that after he published his article about the past atrocities in Germany, unknown assailant raided his work place and burned all the papers and destroyed his printing machine. The goons also beat him severely, causing fifteen fractures in his body. He has been a cripple ever since.

For the remaining duration of my stay in Vienna, the story about Cynthia's father had been gestating in my mind. I finally gathered courage to confront her with her father's deeds. Like the previous time, she burst into rage and accused me of falsely accusing her father of crimes when he was a victim of the Nazi regime. I showed her the images taken in Buchenwald that proved he was a high-ranking Nazi. Cynthia grabbed the images and raced to her mansion. She confronted her father about the journalist's accusation. He fell to his knees and wept and claimed that he was never at Buchenwald; he was in Buchenwald as a victim. It was a blatant lie but Cynthia seemed determined to believe in her father's story.

With time, I started to get astonished by the adeptness of his manipulation. Cynthia's father was becoming increasingly contriving and when he spoke to me on ordinary matters, I no longer knew which part of it to believe in. His despotized sentiments became increasingly aggressive.

The trip to Vienna was supposed to last another day. I decided to shop at the local book store near the mansion and purchased a book on the history of Vienna. Cynthia's father claimed to be originally from Austria and I wanted to learn more about his background. The store owner recognized me from the birthday party. He too was an old friend of Cynthia's father.

Without making small talk, I paid for the book in cash and was attempting to leave the store when the security guard stopped me. He accused me of stealing the book. I protested my innocence and told him that I paid for the book in cash. The store owner heard the commotion and walked over. He looked at me calmly and said that I was a thief. I was so shocked that I couldn't speak. Why was the old man lying about me? I have never done anything to harm him. As my mind was reeling with shock, he ordered the guard to detain me while he called the police. When the cops arrived, I spoke to them in German, a language I had learned during my training at the Camp, stating my innocence but they interviewed the store owner who assured them I was shoplifting. It was hurtful. I was taken to be processed in jail. My phone call was granted to me after an eight-hour wait. I called Cynthia and told her what had happened and how I was framed by the store owner. She promised to bail me out the next morning.

After Cynthia picked me up from the jail, I headed straight to my motel room and began to do research on the store owner who had lied to the police about me. My guess was that the old man was not acting alone, but was persuaded by someone to frame me and put me in prison. My theory proved right when I looked into his financial records. He had unusually high balances in two obscure bank accounts. An anonymous source had sent him money for some reason. I began to suspect that reason was me. He was being paid to neutralize me. I couldn't think of anyone else who would want to silence me except Cynthia's father. He determinedly disproved of my relationship with his daughter and after I suspected him of being a Nazi war criminal, he was not happy with me at all. It was possible that he hired his old friend to harass me while I was still in Europe. I felt that this trip had stretched beyond tolerance so I headed back to America.

I rented a small garage adjacent to a residential area in Hamilton High School. The neighborhood was chiefly impoverished, with residents struggling to meet the needs of their daily sustenance. Nearly one hundred percent of the people living there were Black Americans. Each day, as I walked to the car repair garage, I traipsed through the dilapidated neighborhood, and witnessed sad episodes of the reality of teenage African-Americans living in the United States. What particularly disturbed me was seeing Black youths quarrelling vindictively inside alleyways, vying for membership in dangerous rival gangs and often exchanging weapons or drugs for black money. During afterschool hours, I saw an older boy recruiting several fourteen-year-old boys to join in his armed street gang, so I immediately intervened and explained that it was illegal for youths to carry weapons in the State of New Jersey or join violent groups. But the armed boys cursed me fiercely, and called me a racist man. They mocked me by using stereotypical names, such as 'white bread' and said a white boy had no business interfering with the lives of black people. I patiently told them that I was sincerely interested in their wellbeing, and that as a Russian national, race made no difference to me, and I was genuinely concerned with their welfare, but my pleas were ignored. I however continued to revisit the area and even met the mothers near the local high school. One of the boy's mothers invited me to her house, and tearfully, she told me how the street gang destroyed the lives of two her sons, and they were now in jail, and one was shot during a street gunfight. She begged me to help her save the youngest boy from getting involved in the fierce gang wars that wrecked the black community. I was touched by her warmth and compassion, and began to speak with her youngest son. He was an intelligent young child, and at merely thirteen years of age, he understood the dangers of getting involved in drugs or gangs. After several weeks, I was able to start a small community school, with the support of several parents, and together, we managed to somewhat halt the spread of the African-American gangs from infiltrating Hamilton High School. Despite the trickle of progress, skirmishes continued to take place, and I once had to stop several young boys from attacking teenager, but ended up in the hospital with fractured ribs myself. They reacted violently to me, and called me prejudiced and racist. I understood their frustration the day I personally witnessed an episode taking place in front the High School. I saw a car pull over by the entrance of the high school and a white man took out several cartons of unmarked boxes and delivered it to the older boys who were waiting. From a distance, I saw two of the Black youths argue over payment, and then suddenly, I heard sounds of a gunshot. The idea that someone would dare to exchange gunfire in broad daylight surprised me, but then I saw the unidentified White man step out of a black sedan, gun drawn. Then the arms delivery man abruptly shot both of the young boys. The teenagers looked dead. I started to run towards them, but my injured leg did not allow me to quicken my pace significantly. I tried in vain to memorize the license plate number of the driver, but the white man jumped in his car and took off. I approached the bodies of the two youths and checked for signs of life, but only one of them had a weak pulse. One young man was dead and the other was scarcely alive.

All these sacrifices of young lives. For nothing.

Then something caught my eye. I saw a large submachine gun tucked neatly under the arm of the boy who was still breathing. I knew for a fact he was not carrying any weapons, and he certainly shot no one, but I could not understand why the gun was smuggled

beneath his arm. I tried to ask him what happened, but he spoke incoherently. Before I could make sense of what was happening, the police heard the reports of gunfire, and arrived with sirens blaring. They leaped out with guns drawn, and ordered me to get away. Then two policemen roughly grabbed the injured boy and started to arrest him. I pleaded with the cops and told them the young black man was innocent and he did not fire the gun. The police ignored me at first, but when I showed the accompanying detective how the bullet holes in the body of the dead boy were inconsistent with the submachine gun, he agreed that I had a valid point, but said in the absence of any other suspects, they would charge this young man with the murder of his friend. The police detective and I both knew the Black boy was innocent, and I explained how unjust it would be to charge him with a crime a white arms dealer had done, but in a sympathetic voice, the detective insisted that this is how American legal system worked, and that he would be given a state-appointed attorney and could defend himself. With these words, they handcuffed the wounded boy and took him away in the police car.

The fate of the young boy worried me greatly so I went to his parents and told them what had taken place, and the boy's mother accompanied me to the police station to see him. We were permitted a five-minute visitation, and I asked the boy to tell everything he knew about the white man who supplied them with weapons. The teenager was frustrated, and told me that the police would blame him for the shooting because he was black. He also told me how his lawyer advised him to plead guilty.

The mother broke into hysteric tears for her son, and I wanted to help the young boy and clear his name immediately so I began my own investigation. I interviewed dozens of young Black street gang members and finally found the address of the white man's house. When I went there, I hid behind a shrubbery and waited. To my shock, I saw that the man was exiting a police car and strolled calmly inside his perfectly preened house. It seemed unbelievable to me that policemen in America would shoot two teenage black boys in cold blood and drive away without the slightest remorse, but I knew that no judge or jury would ever believe me or take my word for it, so I wanted to get a closer look inside his house and retrieve the evidence of his crime. I broke into the policeman's car, and looked everywhere for the murder weapon, so I could give it to the detectives.

The glovebox was locked. I proceeded to pry open the locks and as I expected, I saw a pistol. One look at the gun's chamber, and I noticed that it had exactly five bullets missing. That was the precise number of bullets the two Black teenagers got when the man shot them. I realized this was all the evidence I needed to exonerate the boy who was in jail on false charges. I decided to turn over the gun to the police detective, and wrapped the weapon in my handkerchief. I noiselessly stepped out of the police car but before I could slam the door shut, something hit me from the back of my head, and I passed away, and felt myself sinking into a deep hole in the earth, diving for miles, as vision blurred from my eyes, and my head felt as though it had been rammed by a train. With all the strength I could muster, I tried to move my arms and legs. It would not move! I opened my eyes and found myself chained to a small chair. The room looked familiar. It was the townhall meeting room which I had rented on behalf of all the Black parents who held weekly conference with one another in order to find ways to protect their children from drugs, gangs and gun violence. The room was dimly lit, but I saw a door opening and a man walked in. It was the White policeman who had murdered the teenage boy and framed another for the crime.

I told him to let me go, and pleaded that as a policeman, he was supposed to uphold the laws and not break them.

The policeman laughed. "How does it feel to be a nigger-lover?" He snarled at me. "You built this place to save the souls of those druggies and losers? Well, let me tell you this: the black kids you love so much are going to find out that the white bread who came to help them out each day actually blew all of their kids up to smithereens." With these words, he burst into laughter.

"Why?" I whispered in anguish. "Why are you doing this?"

"I am setting up a bomb here, you moron! I always wanted to kill as many niggers' kids as I could, because everyone knows the black teenagers are no good for our society. They only do drugs and fight all day. So, guess what I am going to do? I am going to give you the honor of killing those buddies of your."

The man was carrying a large briefcase, and set it before me. Inside, there were two rectangular sheets of plastic explosives, rigged to a wire. He used a drill machine and fixed the bomb case permanently to the concrete floor of the room, and then meticulously set the timer, and was about to leave. I shouted at him, begging him not to kill those children, but the man laughed. "I am really going to enjoy seeing the faces of those Black kids when they find out their favorite white buddy blew them up. This is timed to detonate exactly when the niggers arrive in this lobby for their weekly meet. So much for trying to save them from drugs and gangs."

The corrupt policeman chuckled with dark humor, and strolled away, locking the heavy door behind him. I was alone in the meeting room. I knew shouting would be useless, as this place was empty. I immediately started to find a way to escape from the chair, and pulled the laces of my boot and used it to bring a pen near me. Then I used the metal tip of the ball-point pen to unlock the chains that bound me to the chair. I was free. But the danger was far from over. I rushed over to the ticking bomb. The timer showed less than ten minutes left. I knew that would be around the time all the parents would begin to arrive.

I fumbled with the wires, but there were three identical red wires running through the circuit. I had no idea which one to cut. One wrong move could prematurely detonate it. My only other option was to lift the bomb and transport the explosives as far as I could.

However, this was not possible, as the metal casing of the bomb was drilled to the ground, affixing it permanently to the room. I knew there was only one other thing for me to do. I ran to the lobby hoping to warn all the parents and make them leave, but before I could enter the space, I caught sight of the policeman's car, parked across the street, his cold eyes gazing eagerly at the lobby through the glass doors of the townhall building. I knew if he saw me warning them, he would remotely detonate the device, killing all of these people instantly.

With a sudden thought, I raced to the back exit, and crept quietly until I reached the policeman's car. He was sitting well out of the blast zone, but I also knew that like all psychopaths, he wanted to witness the carnage of killing innocents personally so he was waiting nearby. I knew these criminals had deep desires to live, so I surprised him from the rear door of his vehicle, and dragged him back to the building with me. Some of the parents who had already arrived for the meeting looked shocked, and asked me why I was dragging a white police officer with me. I told them about the bomb, and then assured the policeman that if the bomb detonates, he will be the first to die in the blast. This made him change his demeanor instantly, and he agreed to deactivate the timer and render the bomb harmless. I was pleased to be able to save those families, and when the actual police arrived, the rogue policeman admitted that he had tried to detonate the explosives due his racist tendencies, and that he had shot the two Black teenagers a week earlier. I turned in the man's weapon to the detectives, who agreed that it was a valuable piece of evidence which would be used to exonerate the other boy from the murder charges. Two days later, the young boy was freed from jail, and he was able to go back to school. Somehow, the incident and the attempted bombing of their townhall building served as a lesson to all the street gang members, and most of the teenagers began to reform and change for the better. In the following weeks, I saw less and less of the street fights, and I rarely saw any black teens smoking marijuana or using other drugs. I had particular admiration for the mother who constantly tried to improve the lifestyle for their children.

Six months later, I received a call from the same police detective who had exonerated the black teenager from the murder charges. He telephoned me to inform me that the White policeman who was jailed for life was mysteriously freed. I quizzed him on how it was possible, and he said the man had very high-level clearance, and that an elderly man had personally visited the jail and paid one million dollars in bond payment for the bail money, and escorted the guilty policeman away in an expensive limousine. I was stunned by this news, and immediately began to investigate who the elderly man might have been. I arrived at the prison the next day and checked all the prison surveillance cameras. I also questioned all the tower guards, and finally, one of them gave me a detailed description of the vehicle and its elderly passenger. I did not need more than five seconds to recognize the vehicle and its owner. It was Richard...

It had been scarcely two years since I had undergone the worst possible physical and mental pain. After the terrible episode in Mexico, Cynthia begged me to give her some time to reconsider our marriage, and she said she needed space on her own to think about everything that had happened. I tried to understand, and assured Cynthia that I would never mind in the slightest if she decided to leave me, especially since I was physically scarred and handicap, and my face was in a horrible condition. My body was still recovering from third degree burns I had acquired from the gangs in Mexico who killed my friends, burned the office building and left me for dead in such a condition that I was afraid that I would never walk again, but even though Cynthia abruptly took leave from my life, one of the dearest people to me on earth managed to nurse me back to health. She was Anastasia, the woman who was sent to America with me, and was officially charged with my welfare, and had been my guardian and caretaker ever since. She worked tirelessly and got me back to prime health. After nearly ten months, I was able to stand gingerly on my both feet. But the facial injuries still left deep gashes on my cheekbones. This woman had been a mother-figure to me, but she was often busy in her own duties for the Soviet government, and we often met only once or twice each year, and that too was for the holidays. However, after I was severely brutalized in Mexico, this kindly woman paused from her official work, and helped me as a real mother would, and she encouraged me to begin life afresh. I was physically fit to move around without assistance and began to rekindle my relationship with Cynthia.

In the midst of healing, I became embroiled in yet another complex farce which caused me to be locked away in American federal prison. The terrible ordeal began when a middle-aged doctor was killed in Richard's house and police immediately arrested him for homicide. I knew the woman well because she was romantically involved with Richard, but the night of her murder, Richard insisted that he was not home. We had all participated in a wonderful dinner in which Richard told us he and woman were secretly married and would officiate the nuptials the next week. The elderly couple seemed very much in love, and the woman expressed genuine happiness for me and Cynthia and wished us both a very happy life ahead. That evening, Cynthia and I said our goodbyes to Richard and his new wife and returned to our small rented apartment. I awoke at three in the morning. The telephone was buzzing. It was the police.

There had been a murder. Richard was arrested for the murder of his fiancée or what we knew as his unofficial wife. I could not believe it. The elderly psychologist was dead! The woman who hosted dinner for us a few hours ago had been murdered? How? Who would want to kill such a harmless woman? My mind swam with unanswered questions. I woke Cynthia and told her what happened. She did not look surprised and said it was possible that her father had killed this woman. I was shocked to hear this. Surely, Richard would never have killed a woman he was so much in love with. But Cynthia refused to get involved in the case. For the next three

weeks, I visited Richard in prison every day, trying to unearth pieces of evidence which would exonerate him. The murder trial was underway, and prosecutors were determined to find Richard guilty. I could not let that happen. Richard was a father to me. He saved me from starvation and death more times than I could count. I had to save him in this time of need. I sold my car, and put my small boat in auction to raise money, and with the eleven thousand dollars I collected, I hired a private investigator and a famous lawyer to defend Richard. It was all the money I had, but I knew it would be worth spending every penny of it, if it meant Richard would be free again.

Richard was wearing a loose-fitting prison jumpsuit. Somehow, the rough garment made him look much shorter than he really was. His balding head was sweaty. I felt terribly sorry for the ordeal he was going through. When he saw me in the visitor's room, his round face broke into a smile. He extended his arms, and I hugged him affectionately, assuring him that I would do everything in my power to free him from jail. Richard assured me I was like his own son, and he said it might help his case if I went public and testified in his favor. If the jury heard my passionate pleas about his innocence, they might exonerate him. I hesitated only for a moment. My own background was very shady, since I had no legal status in the United States. I had arrived in this country in my late teens, using a false identity with an artificial family. This kind of background would be ideal for any American judge or jury to drag through the mud. I would be branded as a criminal Russian boy. I had noticed this many times in the past, where the vast majority of the time when discussing Russia, Americans invoked a framing of the nation as needing to be preserved in the face of alien religion or ideology. They wanted to protect their democracy against uncultured Russian bodies from entering the nation. In their ignorance, most Americans defended criticizing the imagined composition of Russia, creating a deep cultural unease and mistrust. Even diplomatic debates consisted of multi-sited analysis across news coverage of terrorism events, legal transcripts and rulings about unsubstantiated espionage claims, public statements of governmental officials, non-profit reports, television, film, and biographies, investigating the preservation of Russian subjects that commit acts of domestic terrorism and hate crimes and are classified as exceptional criminals, and threats to the state, while the very presence of Russians in the United States was framed as a mortal threat.

They would find out that my mission was to spy for the secret intelligence unit of the Soviet Union and report back. My brief employment stint at the NSA's black budget program was unofficial, because that department did not even exist on paper. I was a ghost, without a name or social security number. Exposing myself on the stand in an American court could become fatal for me, but I did not care about my future any more. I loved Richard and wanted to see him go free. Finally, I ignored all personal peril and decided to take the stand and profess his innocence, telling the inbred jury that Richard was a good man, innocent of any crime.

Cynthia avoided seeing me during these difficult times. I once noticed she had a long conversation with the private investigator I had hired, and since then, she refused to speak to me. I was too busy trying to save Richard and did not have time to have any long discussions with Cynthia. Then one afternoon, I was returning from court after delivering another statement under oath, in which I declared that Richard was innocent of all crimes, when I noticed Cynthia walking briskly out of the visitors' section. I ran up to her, and asked what she was doing in Richard's prison. At first, she avoided my eyes, then she shouted and said I was a murderer. I froze in surprise.

All I could say was, "Why are you calling me a murderer, Cynthia? Who did I supposedly kill?"

Her eyes flashed with anger as she spoke. "Don't you dare play innocent with me! I know all about what you did!"

"What did I do?" I repeated, flabbergasted. "Please! Tell me!"

"I know all about your games!" Cynthia yelled.

"My games?" I did not know what to think, and never felt more confused in my entire life.

"Yes, my father warned me you would try to play dirty games with me and pretend to be an innocent lamb!"

"Cynthia, I truly have no idea what you are talking about." I spoke sincerely, trying to remain calm.

"You killed the psychiatrist. Father told me! You killed that nice woman who cooked dinner for us! You ruined Richard's life and ended his happiness. How could you?"

"I loved that old woman," I said urgently. "Cynthia, I did not kill her. I want to find out who the real killer is as much as everyone else, and I am trying desperately to exonerate Richard."

"My father warned me not to talk to you. He knew you would twist all the facts and confuse me. But I know the truth and I already spoke to the police chief about your guilt."

"You told the police I am the murderer?" I said, stunned.

Cynthia nodded angrily. "Yes! I also handed most of the evidence over to them."

"What evidence?" I was genuinely curious.

Cynthia produced several small bags from her purse. "Here. I kept some as a proof of your guilt. These are the dead doctor's jewelries."

"Where did you find her belongings, Cynthia?" I asked. "These items should belong to the police department's evidence unit."

"You thought you hid them well, didn't you?" Cynthia said, tauntingly. "I found all of these jewelries in your drawer, and hidden inside your woolen socks."

"Please listen." I said quickly. "Someone put those jewelry in there to frame me."

Cynthia ignored my protests, and whipped out a small bracelet. "You recognize this, don't you?"

I shook my head, utterly bewildered.

"You don't have to lie to me anymore," she said. "I spoke with Susan this morning. I went to your garage to look for you and she was there instead."

"Susan? My secretary?" I repeated. "Why did you go to see her?"

"I went to the car repair garage to look for you actually. Susan was wearing this bracelet."

"What is wrong with wearing bracelets? I am sure her husband purchased it for her."

"NO!" Cynthia shouted. "I asked her where she got it. Susan told me you gave this bracelet to her the day after my father's fiancée was murdered. You stole this bracelet from the nice woman who was about to become my stepmother, and then you gave it to your secretary."

"I swear to you, Cynthia. I did not kill the good woman, and I certainly did not steal any bracelet or jewelry. And I never gifted Susan anything. She is merely my employee who logs information about car parts. Her husband helps me out in the garage and fixes car engines. I don't understand what is going on and why you suspect me."

Cynthia sighed sadly. "How could you do this? How could you kill a nice woman who was about to get married to my father? Just for some cheap pieces of jewelry?"

"Cynthia, you know me better than that!" I cried out. I could not imagine what was happening to my life. The woman I loved the most in the world believed I was a cheap murderer. I again tried to reason with her. "Cynthia, how can you believe in the lie? I was with you the night your father's fiancée got murdered. How could I have killed her?"

"Richard said you sneaked out of bed and probably shot her dead, and returned to lay next to me before I awoke." Cynthia shot back. "This gave you the perfect alibi. So do not expect me to lie or cover for you."

My eyes brimmed up with tears, and the hot tears spilled out, glistening down my scarred face. "I am not asking you to lie for me or anyone else, Cynthia." My choked voice broke as I covered my eyes with my hand, and turned away my head. "I only want you to believe in the truth. I am innocent!"

"I already told the police that I would testify on the stand and help convict you for murder." Cynthia said in an unnaturally harsh tone.

"But I have not been convicted or charged with any crimes."

"You will be," Cynthia assured me coldly.

"Just tell me one thing. Please."

"What?" Cynthia snapped.

"How did you know where my socks were? What made you search my clothes and look inside my drawers and shelf?"

"Richard had his lawyers call me two days ago. He asked me to meet him in his prison cell. Then he said you murdered the psychiatrist in order to steal all her jewelries. Richard also said I would find all the evidence I need inside your socks, and shelf. He was right. I did find the evidence of your evil crimes in the exact same place." With these words, she walked away from me briskly, swinging the small purse.

I returned to my apartment and searched the entire room for the alleged evidence Cynthia said she found. I knew one thing for certain. Cynthia was an honest young woman, and she never lied. If she thought I was guilty, someone must have convinced her to go against me, and shown her false evidence of my alleged guilt. I got in touch with the private investigator and asked him to help me find the real killer of the good doctor. I also kept wondering why Richard lied to Cynthia. Why did Richard tell Cynthia to search inside my woolen socks? Who put those jewelries in my shelf? How did Richard know someone had placed the items in my drawer in order to frame me, and make me look guilty to Cynthia? I was very surprised, especially since Richard gave no indication of this sort of behavior when I met with him the previous day. All these arduous questions clouded my thoughts. I wanted to plead with Cynthia, and beg her to be reasonable. Which logical person would kill a person for a handful of cheap jewelries and then keep them in a place where anyone could find it? What motive would I have for committing such a terrible act? I was not a killer. Cynthia must have known that but somehow, her mind was made up. She was determined to pin the murder on me and cause me to be locked up, possibly for life in jail.

My testimony had worked tremendously in Richard's favor. The jury agreed to drop all criminal charges against Richard and found him not guilty of murdering the elderly psychologist.

But they had a new suspect. Cynthia had been true to her word, and handed all the jewelries over to the police. Early the next morning, police smashed down my door and arrested me for the murder of Richard's fiancée.

During my arrest, I thought it was a genuine mistake, and that the police must have confused me with someone else. I was accused of being a felon, guilty of first-degree murder and was seized by federal agents who proceeded to interrogate me for several long hours each day. The victim was Richard's fiancée, an elegant physician who Cynthia and I visited once during the winter season.

When I was framed in a murder case, and was accused of killing the brilliant psychologist, my life became a living hell. Police detectives contemplated over the fact that the woman who was murdered was far more than an unrelated physician to me. Cynthia and I knew her personally. The doctor frequented Richard's house often, especially since it was no secret that she and Richard were romantically involved. I wished the couple extended happiness, and hoped that in his old age, Richard would find a lasting love again.

I knew that Richard had proposed to the nice doctor, and was scheduled to marry her in a private ceremony, so it was not a surprise to see that he was devastated by the death of the psychologist. I did my best to get the jury and the judge free him from blame, but little did I know that this entire time, Richard thought I had killed her.

When the police grabbed me, I was in shock! I could not imagine who would have wanted the doctor dead, but no matter how much I protested my confinement and declared my innocence, the police investigators refused to believe me.

I had only one visitor during my stay in jail: Anastasia. The compassionate woman, who was officially my mother and guardian, said a lawyer came to her and offered to have me freed, provided I went to the official court and testify against Cynthia in front of the judge and jury. She and my lawyer showed me large folders of evidence sheets which apparently proved that Cynthia had killed the physician. I refused to believe it, in spite of what the papers showed. I knew Cynthia had been responsible for locking me up in the murder charges, but I could never accept that Cynthia was a cold-hearted criminal who would murder her stepmother for no reason. I rejected their offer of securing acquittal in exchange for framing Cynthia for a crime, and I sent back word to the lawyer that my prison life was not at all unpleasant, and freedom meant nothing to me if it had to be gained by destroying the life of someone I loved.

But life in prison changed dramatically within a week. Initially, I was permitted a brief stroll around the prison courtyard and had nothing but gloomy sinister-looking fences to stare at morosely.

Built on a steep rocky cliff, the high walls of the prison building loomed dark and imposing above the city. Only the floodlights coming from the guard's tower were the source of light in this dreary atmosphere, highlighting their ominous shadows against the grimy ground. In that dark and dreary place, I fought to contain my composure and bore the harsh treatment silently. Amid volleys of insults thrown my way about my homeland and the people of Russia, I never ventured to react and instead swallowed the testy replies that often lingered at the tip of my tongue. When I was first thrown in the cell, I blanched as the stale air rushed out to greet me. From the moment I entered the dimly lit prison hall and allowed my gaze to move across the darkened cell, I knew my fate had been sealed. I could not help but look forlornly at the miniscule slits in the walls which were somehow considered windows. From the narrow ray of sunshine flowing in, I could tell that it was a bright summer day outside, and yet the room held the ambience of death. My worn boots sounded against the cold stone floor as I discerned the lingering musty scent in the air, bearing testimony to recent rain.

I sensed coordinated hostility on the part of the guards who refused to allow me to make emergency phone calls or receive visitors. I became more and more depressed by the day, and eventually managed to speak with a warden, who ordered me to cooperate with a state-appointed lawyer. The attorney who represented me said the charges against me were serious and that there was only one way I could save myself. I had to confess to the court and plead guilty. Naturally, I rejected the notion, but the attorney insisted this was my only option, and during the brief trial, he submitted my pleas to the judge, who promptly sentenced me to life in prison.

This court sentencing felt like a hot anvil hammering over my head. Weeks were passing swiftly by, and I tried to get in touch with a civilian attorney who might have appealed this unjust sentence, but my efforts were in vain. The warden, the guards and fellow prisoners behaved with suspicious animosity. One of the prison guards spat and kicked at me almost each day during mealtimes, calling me a Russian swine. I was hopeless, lost in my own despair. Just when I started to think life could not offer me anything worse, I came across several violent straggling gangs in the prison, who were kept isolated from the general population due to their aggressive behavior.

An African-American middle-aged man entered my cell once the door opened for roll call. I did not pay any particular attention to him, for I knew him from before. He was in my adjacent cell on assault charges, but I was relieved that the more violent prisoners who had been released from solitary the night before were not in the general population area. I was tidying my cot when I heard sharp whispers.

Whirling around, I saw the middle-aged man was now accompanied by five more black men. Fear flooded my heart, and I realized I was in trouble.

They say at the time of death or despair, the past memories come flooding back and people recall the faces and words of their loved ones. To a certain extent, it was true, for when I saw the male inmates of this super-max American prison coming to attack me, my mind floated back to my adolescence in the USSR. When I had been accepted into the senior ranks of the Camp. He told us the mission we would carry out from here would be vital to the security and peace of the worlds. With so many bitter conflicts and bloodshed taking place all over the African and Asian continent, I felt that mankind was at war. I wanted to believe I was on the right side of humanity, on the correct end of civilization, but often the line between the right and wrong got blurred in the field, but one thing I did know was that duty of patriotism and compassion and blind and irrational hate was not the same. I loved my motherland, but I also wanted to correct the mistakes many of the powerful men in my country had made. I was a discarded orphan, and wanted to find my purpose in life. Upon arriving in America, Richard showed me the path to salvation. I believed in his goodness, and trusted him like a beloved father. I thought I would be able to unhinge tyranny and poverty by serving him loyally. I often recalled what Richard had told me when we first met. He said that I was not betraying my comrades at all by working for this NSA black ops division, but I was in fact helping the USSR save itself from all kinds of enemies. Defeating the enemy was important but victory and vengeance was not the same, so I focused on achieving victories, both in personal life and in the professional arena.

Back in the filthy American prison cell, angry looking men surrounded me. They had clenched fists and paced up and down. I was a little confused when I noticed the hard look in their eyes. This was not a friendly excursion. I asked casually, what was the matter? Then there were eight more prisoner, all moving closer menacingly, walking with controlled swagger. I remembered seeing three of those prisoners before. They all were in prison for life, after being found guilty of rape and First-Degree premeditated murder.

Two of them assaulted numerous women before being sentenced to fifty years in the maximum-security prison. Seeing them in my cell sent my heart racing in a frenzy as I knew they were dangerous to be around. I had no clue why they were picking on me, when I had done nothing to remotely provoke them, but I wanted to avoid a prison fight at all cost, so I backed to the cell wall, raising my hand in a pacifist gesture. I had been beaten senseless by several skinhead criminals in this prison, but these black men never hit me before, nor did they ever get out of their way to bully me, so I could not fathom why they had suddenly decided to make me a target of their bullying. "I don't want any trouble, man." I said softly, keeping my voice steady, but one of them snarled at me, and said they were going to make sure a white pig like me remembers this assault for the rest of my life. In utter confusion, I tried to lunge past them and call the guards, but all the security personnel seemed to have mysteriously vanished. I was alone, stuck in the horrid cell with scores of angry and violent men.

When the two men first punched me in the face, I doubled over as waves of pain radiated down my body. I tried to block the vicious blows with my outstretched arms, but it was useless. A sharp blow to the ribs left me breathless, as a fist slammed into my eyes, temporarily blinding me. I burst into involuntary tears. As I went on crying, my eyes were watered into crazy mistiness by acrid and difficult tears. Then the physical assault halted momentarily and I thought they had left. But I was wrong. That was when more men entered the cell, and ripped my prison overalls, and began to assault me, both physically and sexually. There were over twenty men striking and assaulting me, and no matter how hard I tried to fight, I was no match for their strength. Then another heavysset man punched me. My tooth cut through my lip when the large fist connected with my cheek. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth while the stinging rushed through my face. Before I could register the magnitude of the pain, a size fourteen boot slammed into my stomach, knocking me to the ground.

I could barely hear the man's voice over the sounds of my gasps of pain. I tried to regain my composure and took care to breathe in through my nose, and out through my mouth, struggling to remain conscious. The giant man charged toward me, taking a swing at my face. I remembered to duck and slammed my elbow right into the opponent's nose. The impact caused me to lose my balance, stumbling backward, disoriented. Using that in my favor, I used the force of my ankle and pulled against my knee causing it to give out. But by this time, three other men began kicking me most viciously. A tall Black prisoner kept trampling on my head, until I was sure my skull had cracked.

I screamed in helpless rage, trying to roll away, but two of them grabbed me, pinning me against the metal bars of the cell door. I couldn't stop crying and I couldn't stand up straight. My legs would not support me. It felt like a physical part of me was being ripped off of my body. The terror went on for hours, until my voice became hoarse from screaming and cursing, and I fell senseless intermittently. I shouted and protested, and even pleaded with the assailants, but my words were barely audible over my frenzied sobbing. My teeth shattered against the cold walls of the prison cell, as my agonized cries filled the small enclosure, and with both arms pinned behind me, I used my legs to kick the prisoners who were assaulting me, but one of them slammed the hammer down forcefully, aiming directly over my right knee. I was certain they had crushed the bones beneath it. The tall and heavysset prisoners continued to

punch me with brass knuckles, and warm blood flowed down my neck and I heard a terrible crunch. My left ear! Someone had bit it off. I writhed in fright. Being helpless was a terrible feeling, knowing I could not defend myself against all these strong and violent men. It was one of those moments where I genuinely beseeched a higher power to deliver me from the evil. I prayed so zealously, that until today, I cannot know if I shouted out loud or prayed in silence, but the words echoed shrilly in my head and seemed to ring in my ears. Oh, God! I pleaded ardently. Destroy every single one of these rapists and abusers. Oh God, wherever you are! Destroy every single man who violates the sacred bond of brotherhood and dishonor other men by sexually assaulting them. Let them perish in disgrace and burn forever in hell. And destroy the bodies and souls of those who hired those men to do this terrible act. I was still screaming in terror and pain until I lost consciousness. I hoped my curses destroy each and every one of them and follow them to their graves! I wished utter torment upon them, so that their dying breath would be most torturous, and painful. I hoped they died in famine, sickness, poverty and thirst, and I cursed their graves to be filled with the blazing flames of the hell fire. But even as I cursed them, I knew it was nothing compared to what they were doing to me. God was too noble, and no punishment in His hell was enough for these fiends! Then, only blackness filled my vision and I thought I had died.

As a man, I felt very defiled and lonely after being abused by dozens of male prisoners, chiefly because there was no one to turn to. When you are a woman, people show compassion and everyone has mercy on you if you get sexually assaulted, but when you are a man, others often hate you even more. Confessing to what happened becomes impossible because no one wishes to believe you. Even the prison doctors do not trust you. No one is willing to help you despite this situation being one of the most terrible and damaging for any man. Oh, if only people knew that this was the most scary and damaging thing that could happen to a man in the entire universe- to be dishonored so wretchedly at the hands of a fellow man, to have the honor of brotherhood shatter to pieces. I felt anger beyond reason and reproach. Oh, how I desired to take revenge and hit back at those men who hurt me. The wish to take revenge was so strong that my body shook and my hands trembled, and I felt physical pain in being unable to exact vengeance. I was consumed with rage! All I wanted to do was to smash their jaws and break their faces so they could never assault another man again. There is nothing more painful than being betrayed by those you trusted as your comrades and brothers and friends. For a man, no torture, no abuse, no amount of beating was as painful as getting raped or assaulted by a fellow man. It is doubly torturous because you think of those men to be your very own brothers in arms, blood comrades who fight alongside you to destroy common enemies, or even those men who fight with honor against you, and it is that brotherhood that keeps the world habitable and sane. There can be no dignity or honor left within men who touch and degrade other men or abuse other young men without any thought of human decency or friendship. Oh, how I cursed them in silence and wished they would disappear from the face of earth and never again be able to torment people like me.

Hours later, I heard sharp echoes of sobs. It was my own voice. There was no one around. The assaulters had left. Now, alone in the cell, waves of dizziness overwhelmed my senses, and I lost all self-control and burst into tears like an infant. I no longer felt as though I had any self-worth or dignity left. I didn't care if the prison guards heard me wailing. My aching skin was ripped and shredded. I was sick and sore and snot was rolling down my tear-stained face and blood coated the side of my cheek from where they had repeatedly struck.

My limbs were swollen, due to the deadly blows I received. I wanted to leave the accursed prison cell, but could barely make it to the door without collapsing. I was too weak to even walk. The pain was excruciating and I knew they had likely crushed the bones in my hand. My flaxen hair was splattered with blood. I did not want to think about what had just happened, because I could not bear the shame. Never before in my life had I been so severely humiliated. I hated myself for not being strong enough to defend myself against the sexual assault by so many perpetrators. My injured body was in no condition to fight again and I had no possible means of taking revenge from those prisoners. With pain in my heart, I prayed to God to punish them in this life and the next. I cursed those men who betrayed the brotherly camaraderie of youths and assaulted them.

I was surprised to find that I was still alive the next day. Shrill beeping from the alarm system roused me from the unconscious state. The prison guards refused to accept my complaints and I had to spend the following weeks bleeding, with heavy tears slowly dripping down my cheeks, trying to overcome gradually from the symptoms of extreme shock. Wave after wave of nausea hit me and I refused meals for days. I felt as though my body was hit with a storm and years later, although most of the physical damage has been bandaged, I still felt the scars.

I did not believe there could be a place on earth viler and more terrifying than an American jail, but I was inwardly grateful to be free. The pain I had endured scarred my both physically and psychologically. But I tried to survive, to live on yet again, and to love those who were kind to me. Like the burning constellations which burned forever, I was destined to live amidst a cluster of sadness. The day my beloved mother had died, I was left a trampled orphan, and a callous neighbor's ward. It seemed so long ago that I had witnessed happy days and walked under sunny skies. Alone in a country, so far away from my native land, I suffered the misfortune of never

seeing the raising of the Russian flag. America was a mere collection of united states, which locals proudly called a land for the free, but I felt more and more like an indentured slave, trapped within blundering bureaucracy of the carefully camouflaged centers of defense and security. Absent from these state buildings were the national colors decorated with pride, and in its stead, I only saw white alien stars scattered on a foreign flag. The few friends I had remaining perished daily, one by one, and in vain I looked on with blinded eyesight, believing all will be well in the end, but would to God that I had remained in the motherland, despite the wild miseries, rain and snow!

The reality of my hopeless situation dawned on me, and suddenly, in a passionate fit of tears, I decided that now was the perfect time to die. Getting assaulted by so many criminals made me hate my defiled body so desperately, that I wanted to end my miserable life. I grabbed the cold railing and banged my head against grills to commit suicide. The pain in my skull was a sharp relief from the agony that was eating away at my heart. For a few seconds, I was surprised at my own actions. I was a skilled operative for the KGB, and was sent to this country to infiltrate the American intelligence, and with the help of Richard, I was able to further my career in remarkable ways, but at this moment, nothing mattered to me anymore, and I did not want to live on this treacherous earth for one more second. Calling upon God, and praying to heaven was useless. I think I had become an atheist that day in prison, and for many years afterwards, I did not pray or bless over the saints, and it was only many years later, that I invoked the name of God. I only believed in god after the little girl was born from the wonderful couple who lived next door, and I saw how hundreds of men were hired to attack her. I knew I had to protect the child, but I could not do it alone. I needed the help of God.

My frustration suddenly mounted. I thrust my forehead against the hard and rusty metal, but the force was not enough to kill me. My own grunts of pain attracted the attention of a guard and he used his baton to beat me until I had no more energy to smash my head against the wall and kill myself.

The guard banged his baton on the bars. The metallic clang woke me from my near-unconscious state. He announced that I had a visitor, and ordered me to get out. After fastening three separate loops of chain around me, the policemen led me from the tiny cell. Limp, and in terrible pain, I tried to move at their pace, and when the guards paused to unlock a gate, I turned my head and caught a faint glimpse of sunlight streaming from an overhead window. It was my first sight of the blue sky. What a beautiful color it was! I had forgotten that I was still existing in a physical world where nature and wind, sun and the sky were skill encompassing us, and there was still a heaven above that governed all our affairs and would watch over helpless ones who were suffering. I strained my eyes to gaze at the tiny crack in the window, hoping to memorize the carving or the soft clouds and the diamond rays of the sun. Then I was pushed into a narrow corridor and the sky was gone. The last ray of sunshine abandoned me.

The American policemen led me into a small dark room, where Anastasia was already waiting for me. She sat behind a wooden desk, and raised her eyes to look at me. Her eyes flashed with fear and shock. I was not surprised. My physical state was very fragile. My left eye was swollen and I had a thick gauze over my broken nose. She got to her feet and inquired about my health, but I could not speak, or meet her eyes. I could never explain this behavior even to myself, but there was something missing in my heart, as though a part of my soul was ripped away from me. I was a broken man, drowning in utter shame and fear. For a fleeting moment, I wanted to be left alone, and wallow in my own grief.

She smiled with motherly love, and assured me that I would be out of here in no time. Then she exchanged a few sharp rebukes with the guard and turned to leave.

I had an overpowering urge to reach my arms out and hug her, but the guards kept the handcuffs firmly fastened to another chain around my waist. I was shackled like a caged animal that was condemned for slaughter.

"Mom," I croaked out, unable to stop myself. "Would you please hug me?"

The armed policeman standing next to me raised his gun, and shouted that an inmate was not allowed to physically touch visitors, but Anastasia was a fiercely independent Russian woman, and she scolded the guard so severely that he backed away from me. The elderly woman then embraced me, reminding me not to worry and that she would take care of all the problems I was facing. I dropped my head on her shoulder and sobbed. She stiffened at my weakness, and tried to inquire if anything happened to me. I refused to tell her what those inmates did to me, and insisted that I hurt my face after accidentally banging my head on the iron bars of my cell. I could sense that Anastasia did not believe me, for she knew me only too well. Ever since arriving from the Soviet Union, she had been my legal guardian and knew almost every tiny detail of my life. I felt terrible about lying to her, but my honor could not tolerate the humiliation of letting anyone on earth know how the other prisoners molested me. It was too painful to repeat or even think about. She took a step back to study my face, and used her handkerchief to wipe the tears off my face, warning me of the importance of staying brave.

As Anastasia's steps echoed down the hall after leaving me in the tiny visitor's cell, I sat hard on the metal chair, trying to maintain a calm façade, but I failed. Despair suddenly seized me, and I slid to the cold ground like a rag doll. Curling into a ball, I burst into a fresh bout of sobs, hoping the earth would swallow me and make me disappear forever.

Cynthia told me she would fly in from Vienna with her father a week later and join me in the States. I took the flight solo and settled in for the trans-Atlantic voyage. The airhostesses were uncommonly friendly. A handful of them gave me their phone numbers and wanted to be friends. I received invitation to at least three homes. I was feeling lonely upon my arrival in America so I ended up calling one of the women. She was a lovely blonde person who had told me all about her boyfriend's infidelity while we were on the airplane. The stewardess was overjoyed when I called her and invited me over to apartment right away. I felt guilty about straying away from my commitment to Cynthia, but not for a moment did I have any intention to cheat on her. I would only speak to the friendly air hostess and share some laughs over couple of drinks. That would be all.

The amicable rendezvous was scheduled for the afternoon. I arrived early at the local bar and saw that the woman was waiting for me. Her name was Laura. We became friends almost instantly. I hadn't realized how long it had been since I spoke with someone without quarrelling about an issue. For the past several months, every conversation I had with Cynthia became embroiled around the subject of her father and it deepened a bitter feeling in both of us. In order to appease her, I had to skirt carefully around my thoughts and avoid phrases that could enrage her. The deliberations were exhausting.

With Laura, I could be myself again. I could speak freely and laugh to my heart's content. That evening, Laura invited me to her house. It was a cozy suburban abode with neat fences. She insisted I stay for a drink, and somewhere in between, we became intimate. I regretted it right away, and not wanting to be unfaithful to Cynthia, I wanted to leave Laura's house. However, she was unusually persuasive and began to cry and wail. She said she couldn't love if I abandoned her. I decided to spend a few more days with her before gently explaining that my long-time girlfriend who was unofficially my fiancée would be arriving in the States soon and that I could not carry on any sort of relationship with another woman. I hinted this much when Laura begged me to keep a platonic relationship with her. She said she didn't want to lose me as a friend. I agreed begrudgingly.

Meanwhile, Cynthia had called ahead to inform me that she would arrive at Dulles Airport. I went to the airport to receive her but she was nowhere to be found. I later went to her apartment and discovered her lying miserably amid a pile of polaroid photos.

Cynthia flew into a fit of rage when she saw me and swore at me most viciously. I was thunderstruck. The soft-spoken girl I had known for so long was behaving like a deranged woman. I didn't know the cause for her anger until I glanced at the photos she tossed into my direction. There were hundreds of still shots of my intimate encounters with Laura as well as my dates with the other airhostesses I had met on the airplane. I even saw a picture of a drunk woman who was practically molesting me in a pub, but the image made it appear as though I was a willing participant. I could understand why Cynthia was angry. She felt I had betrayed her. But what disturbed me even more was who was taking all those pictures of me? Certainly, I was the only person in Laura's house that night. No one was inside the room when we were having a drink in her living room. My guess was there was a hidden camera pre-set into the woman's house. There must have been someone following me on the alley when the picture of the intoxicated was taken. Who was after my activities was unknown to me but when I saw the pictures in Cynthia's house, I had a rough idea of who might be behind the spying affair. I calmed Cynthia and demanded to know who had given her the envelope filled of pictures. She said it was lying in her mail box when she arrived from Vienna. But she refused to speak with me after that and forced me to leave her house.

By this time, there was little doubt in my mind that Cynthia's father had been desperate to discredit me and he must have planted those photographers or private investigators to take those pictures. I admit that it was immoral to become involved with another woman while my girlfriend was away but I had broken off with Laura and was now maintaining a platonic friendship. I could not excuse my behavior but the photos were also taken out of context. The scantily dressed drunken woman was not my lover at all; rather a nuisance I was trying to avoid. But how can Cynthia ever understand that? I realized her anger would not abate anytime soon, so I began my own inquiry into the pictures. I returned to Laura's house in order to unearth the camera location that was fitted into the house. I matched the angle at which the camera might have been placed and found a hollow space behind the bookshelf. It was disguised as a giant encyclopedia. I wondered if Laura knew about the camera but decided against asking her.

Instead, I went to the bar in which a photographer had evidently snapped multiple pictures of me. I scanned the noisy pub and noticed two men who entered behind me. I couldn't recognize them but I could swear I saw them somewhere. One of the men had a large camera swinging from his shoulder bag. I realized they must be the ones who were following me, spying on me and taking pictures of me. When I made eye-contact with one of the men, the duo bolted out the back door. I raced behind them, wanting to question them about their employer. Both ran into an alleyway but I was able to tackle the thick-set man with the camera. He landed on his back and before I could deliver a powerful blow to his jaw, he raised his hands in surrender. I seized the camera and removed the memory card. He denied knowing his employer's name but readily provided me with a detailed physical description. It matched Cynthia's father. I warned the man to never follow me again and I let him go.

It was late in the afternoon when I received a panicked phone call from Laura. She was hysterical and said someone was trying to break into her house. I became frightened for her safety and ran all the way to Laura's house. The front door was ajar. I entered the space and found her crying on the bed. Her face was badly bruised, almost as though someone had stuck her repeatedly in the face. My heart burst in anger and sympathy. Who could do something so terrible to a sweet person like Laura? I told her to tell me the name of the person who did this to her. She just wept and shook her head. All Laura told me was that she didn't want the crazy woman to get into any more trouble. I froze when I heard the phrase. What woman? I screamed. Laura merely shook her head and continued crying.

Then I saw the small colorful scarf on the floor. It was blue checkered silken scarf which I had seen Cynthia wear the previous day. I asked Laura if Cynthia was here, if Cynthia did this to her? Laura wept and said she does not want Cynthia to get into trouble. But at that point, I had lost all patience, I told Laura that my relationship with Cynthia is over and I will personally confront her on her cowardly act of hitting Laura. Laura tried to stop me but I went at full speed and stormed into Cynthia's house. She tried to keep the doors shut and lock me out but I forced my way in. I showed her the scarf and asked her why she had beaten up Laura. She denied even knowing who Laura is. I accused her of lying but she spat in my face and tried to push me out. Just then, an old man exited from the bedroom and shouted. I looked up. It was Cynthia's father and he was holding a gun. He ordered me to get away from his daughter. I was confused, upset and felt betrayed. Cynthia insisted she was never at Laura's place and I knew she was not a habitual liar, and I also wondered what her father was doing in Cynthia's apartment. By this time, he was loading his weapon to fire at me so I hurried out of the house.

I needed to know the truth so I rushed back to Laura's house to see if she was doing all right. When I got there, the lights were all lit. I peeked in through the window and saw that a man was inside, embracing and talking to Laura. They looked very much in love. From the open window, I could overhear some parts of their conversation.

The man was apologizing over and over for hitting her.

"Oh, but I wanted you to, dear" Laura was saying sweetly. "Boy, wasn't it worth it to see the anger on John's face when he thought his fiancée beat me up!"

"So, he didn't suspect you then?" The man questioned.

"Not in the least. The fool thinks I love him. Besides, the scarf you stole from Cynthia did the trick. He is probably bashing her to a pulp right now." Laura laughed again.

"At least, we have the money," the man was saying. "It makes me jealous to see you with him, but the old man said you got to keep the affair going. He'll double our money if you can keep him away from his daughter permanently. Make him commit to marriage or something."

"I'm a woman, honey," Laura protested. "What can I do if he doesn't propose?"

"Then you tell him you are pregnant," Laura's boyfriend suggested.

"But I am not."

"You will be. Tonight, we are going to spend a long time together. And tomorrow, you call that loser and tell him you are having his kid. Then once this whole thing is over and we get enough money from the old guy, you and me can live happily ever after. With our baby."

As this conversation played out, I felt my blood curdling in anger. It was so unfair that the couple was using me and exploiting my emotions. I should have guessed that the stewardess in the airplane was showering me with unusual attention and warmth. It was all an act. I really believed that Laura genuinely cared about me. Now, I have to hear about their scheme. She lied to me about Cynthia. Her boyfriend struck her face so that there would be a visible bruise and I would believe her story about Cynthia showing up in her place and beating her. I wondered how much money Cynthia's father was spending on trying to destroy my relationship with his daughter and how far he would go. This episode made me more determined however. I would never let anything else get in my way with Cynthia. She was my one true love and I intended to fight any obstacle that came in the way. I was angry at being used by so many people. Laura lied to me about Cynthia, and I ended up hurting the woman I loved. I hoped Cynthia would be able to forgive me.

The following several weeks were difficult for me. I was trying to better my relationship with Cynthia and held deep conversations with her. I told her how her father was determined to break our relationship and keep us apart. We both vowed to stay together no matter what. We moved to a small studio in the city center and began to pick up where we left off. Meanwhile, I felt that it was an ideal opportunity for me to begin research on the whereabouts of Cynthia's mother. I reached out to the journalist in Vienna and asked him to mail me all the relevant documentation he possessed about Ekaterina.

Although I faced obstacles at every turn, and twice the people I was scheduled to interview ended up getting into mysterious accidents, I persisted in my search. Cynthia's father seemed desperate to keep her mother's existence a secret. Not even a picture of the

woman remained in the family house. The more obstacles he placed in my path, the more resolved I became to find out about Ekaterina. I searched through sealed medical records and finally tracked Cynthia's mother to a prison in Belarus. She was being kept in isolation for the past decade. I made a secret trip to Belarus and was able to find out where she was being kept.

After bribing local police, I was allowed to meet with Cynthia's mother. The guards told me she was insane and had been in an asylum for many years, but the woman who stood before me did not look mad to me at all. She was calm and collected. At first, she refused to engage in a conversation with me, but when I mentioned Cynthia, she quickly nodded and asked questions about her daughter. She wanted to know everything about Cynthia. I asked her why she was here and she told me a harrowing tale of betrayal and pain.

Ekaterina told me about the time she met Cynthia's father. Both of them were fresh out of spy training centers. Ekaterina was working for the famed KGB while Richard was a young recruit in CIA's domestic protective division. They bonded instantly and soon got married. However, Ekaterina was recalled to Moscow a few months after she married Richard. The KGB director personally ordered her to break her relationship with Richard, as conflicting spy agencies were not supposed to intermingle. Ekaterina did her patriotic duty and divorced her American husband. She then married her handler, a KGB agent who was from eastern Romania. A year after Ekaterina's marriage, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl and named her Cynthia, after herself.

Richard was still on the lookout for his missing wife when he finally met her during a joint Soviet-American mission in the Balkans. Ekaterina was moved by how much Richard still loved her and she decided to move to America with him. In American courts, they had never been divorced. They began to live as a couple again and Cynthia grew up knowing that Richard was her biological father. However, after Cynthia became six years old, Ekaterina wanted to tell the child the truth about who her father was.

That was a tipping point in their relationship. Richard vehemently opposed the plan and warned Ekaterina never to disclose the identity of Cynthia's real father. When Cynthia's mother threatened to leave him, Richard framed her for the murder of several CIA officers and had her arrested. She was extradited to Russia to face trial for the murder of yet another GRU regional director and the courts sentenced her to life in an isolated prison.

I wanted to verify the story and went to meet the Romanian man who Ekaterina had married. I found him in an old home, his body brittle with battling cancer. I told him all that had transpired between Ekaterina and Richard. He had no idea Richard had framed his wife for the murder of so many people. He gave me the contacts of several of his Russian friends and told me to go to them with specific messages. He assured me those men would know best how to deal with Richard.

During the following weeks, I visited him multiple times. The man confided his real name to me. It was Gabriel Ștefan. Each week, I made sure to visit Ștefan and bring along his favorite newspaper issues. He was excited to hear that I was dating his daughter Cynthia. Like Ekaterina, the Romanian man wanted to know all about Cynthia. I told him snippets from our daily life. He told me that Cynthia was his biological daughter, and never belonged to Richard. When I asked him how he lost contact with his daughter, Ștefan told me Ekaterina and Richard were close friends and when he got married to Ekaterina, Richard continued to frequent their house and after Cynthia was born, they agreed that they should nominate Richard as the guardian of their child should something ever happen to either one of them. Ștefan and Ekaterina's relationship soured soon after Cynthia's birth because Richard began to hint to his old friend that Ekaterina loved him and the child was in fact his.

Ștefan was less interested in Richard and wanted to know what kind of person Cynthia had grown up to be. I assured Ștefan his daughter was a magnificent person and that she lived with the director of NSA's black op program.

I visited Cynthia's biological father a week before Christmas. As an early present, I brought several albums of photographs Cynthia and I had taken since we started dating. Ștefan beamed with happiness as he leafed through the waxed pages. He said Cynthia had his hair. I instinctively glanced at his starch white hair and we both burst into laughter. I was amazed at the nonchalance of this elderly man. It had been a long time since I had the heart to laugh freely. Ștefan had a gentle bearing within him that calmed me and made me feel loved. I was inwardly pleased to have found Cynthia's real father. He was a good man; someone I had hoped would be my father-in-law one day.

Before I departed, Cynthia's father asked me to take a walk with him on the snow-covered pavement in front of the senior center. I helped wrap woolen scarf and hat around his thin body and joined him in brief stroll. However, the winter chills proved too much for the elderly Romanian man and he caught a mild cold. Fearing he might not survive the cold, Ștefan wanted to see his daughter one last time in case he passed away so I promised him I would bring Cynthia with me in my next visit.

True to my word, I called Cynthia and told her about Ekaterina and her real father Ștefan. Cynthia didn't believe a word I said to her but she agreed to meet the dying Romanian man. We went to the old home together and proceeded to the room in which he was being cared for. On our way up the stairs, I noticed that two of the nurses who were leaving had odd shoes on their feet. Rather than

work shoes, they were wearing heavy insulated boots. Almost as though they had come directly from a chemical lab or a weapons factory. I ignored my thoughts as paranoia and entered the room.

The man I had met a month earlier was lying motionless on the hospital bed. I hurried to Ștefan's side and gazed at those wide sightless eyes. There was no life in them. Ekaterina's husband, Cynthia's biological father was dead. Cynthia stifled a scream at the sight of the corpse and hurried out to summon the nurse. I leaned against the door way and collected my thoughts. It was highly unusual. Something was terribly wrong. I knew it was not a coincidence that Cynthia's biological father would die the day after he wanted to meet Cynthia.

Someone didn't want him to meet his real daughter and killed him before he got the chance to see her face to face. I felt miserable. I lost the one person who put his faith in me. I couldn't keep him safe.

Before I left the hospital, I collected a sample of hair from the man's personal effects. A DNA test would prove if he was telling the truth about being Cynthia's father. I conducted the test without telling Cynthia. The lab results proved my suspicions to be correct. The paternity test was a match. The Romanian man was indeed Cynthia's biological father. When I confronted Cynthia with the lab report, she reacted abrasively and claimed that the only father she ever knew was the one who had raised her. I insisted we run a paternity test to rule out any doubts. Once more, the DNA of Cynthia's father, the NSA black op director who had been raising her as his own, was not a match with her. This time, she really confronted him and demanded an explanation.

The former black op director broke down in tears and swore that he loved Cynthia like his own child. He begged for forgiveness and said he never cared about DNA results. All he knew was that Ekaterina's daughter was his child as well. I wanted to warn Cynthia that the old man may not be telling the entire truth because the mysterious death of her biological father on the very day he was supposed to meet his real daughter raised red flags. But I had no proof that Richard had killed the Romanian man. I didn't want to slander him and cause more pain to Cynthia.

Cynthia's father, or Richard, as I now called him, was apologetic and invited both of us to his house. He was loving and kind towards us but the more I observed his behavior towards Cynthia, the more it seemed unnatural to me. I told Cynthia that her father, or step-father was obsessed with her. She dismissed my concern and said he was just concerned for her safety and wanted to look after her properly. I had a nagging feeling that he had ulterior motives. Cynthia was ferocious to hear my skeptic idea but I was sure this time I was not mistaken.

I became more desperate to keep Cynthia away from the overbearing old man and suggested we move to a different state or country. Cynthia agreed and we began to make plans for a big move.

One week later, I walked into a young man at a dollar store. He was wearing a security guard's uniform. I was certain I had seen the man before so I asked him where he had worked previously. He admitted that twelve days ago, he left his previous place of employment at a senior center and took a job here. I asked him to give me the exact address of the nursing home. When he gave me the location, I recognized it at once. It was the old home where Cynthia's biological father had died a week earlier. Gabriel Ștefan was a fulltime resident there.

I asked the guard if he remembered any particular visitors that came to see a Romanian resident who was housed on the second floor of the center. The guard recalled a well-dressed man who arrived the same day the patient passed away. The visitor had claimed to be an old friend and went to see the Romanian man but left in a hurry. I extracted a photo of Richard and asked the guard to confirm if this was the last visitor the Romanian patient had. He was positive.

I did not want to believe Richard was capable of murder but it seemed unusual that Cynthia's biological father would die minutes after Richard visited him at the senior center. I wanted to believe it was a coincidence but when I asked Richard if he had ever visited Cynthia's real father in the senior center, he insisted he never went and didn't even know where the nursing home was located.

I was taken aback by his lie and confided my suspicion to Cynthia. This time, Cynthia looked disturbed. She wanted to know who killed her real father but I admitted that I had no actual evidence linking Richard to the murder because the nursing home he was living in was old school and did not have surveillance cameras inside the resident's room.

Cynthia told me she would run a bluff with Richard and find out the truth. I accompanied her to her stepfather's house and waited while she went inside to confront him.

"I saw it, daddy," Cynthia was telling Richard.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not a little girl anymore," Cynthia said, her voice raising steadily. "Don't treat me like a child. I know what you did. I watched the live feed from the security camera that had been installed in the nursing home. You were there. In Gabriel Ștefan's room."

"What camera are you talking about?" Richard asked. He sounded afraid.

"The security camera at the senior center where my real father was staying. You were the last person to visit him. Do you deny it?"

“Cynthia, listen to me. It is true I went to see your father in the nursing home, but that was only because he asked me to.”

“My real father wanted to see you?” Cynthia sputtered. “But why?”

“Your father knew he was ill,” Richard explained. “He asked me to look after you and keep you safe if he died.”

“Is that why you killed him?” Cynthia demanded.

“Kill him?” Richard repeated, with some severity of tone. “My darling, how could you say this! I raised you and loved you as my own daughter and you think I am capable of murder?”

“Then why does the security camera in my father’s room show you suffocating him to death with a pillow?” Cynthia was crying. “I saw the feed. It was you. You choked my father until he died.”

“Cynthia, you were mistaken!” Richard pleaded with her.

“I saw it! I saw what you did!” Cynthia wailed. “How could you?”

I heard loud groaning. It sounded as though Richard was weeping as well. “Sweetheart, if you gave me a chance to explain-”

“No, I don’t want to talk to you!” Cynthia shouted.

Richard however was speaking again. “It’s time I tell you the truth.” He spoke between fits of sobs. “I admit it, I killed your father but only because he asked me to. When I went to visit him, he told me he was ill, and he didn’t want to suffer a prolonged life. He begged me spare him the agony of a slow death in the hospice and asked me to kill him.”

“I don’t believe it,” Cynthia said defiantly. “Why would he ask you to kill him if he was supposed to meet with me that very day?”

“Your father told me about you,” Richard said in a tremulous voice. “He said he had a lot of enemies, and if they knew you were related to him, they would harm you. So, he also begged me never to let you come near him. That’s why, for all these years, I have kept you with me, to protect you.”

“But you shouldn’t have killed my father, even if he begged you to! It wasn’t right!”

“I swear to you, Cynthia, I never wanted to hurt that man, but he begged me to do him one last favor. We were friends many years ago, ever since he had married your mother. I couldn’t refuse his final wish. He wanted me to take his life, as mercifully as possible. Your father told me if I didn’t kill him right away, his enemies would come and torture him and find out about you. Then your life would be in danger. I had to do this despicable act to keep you safe, Cynthia.”

“Really?” Cynthia said. “You did it for me?”

“Sweetheart, every morally objectionable thing that I have ever done was to protect you,” Richard declared.

Somehow, Cynthia was satisfied with Richard’s explanation and she returned to my house in good spirits. Cynthia assured me her stepfather had acted in her best interest and that he had not wanted to kill her biological father but felt that he had no choice.

I was stunned to see how easily Richard was able to manipulate Cynthia. She readily forgave him for killing her own father because he managed to convince her it was for her own protection. I didn’t believe for one moment that Richard murdered the old Romanian man as a mercy killing. I acquired medical reports from the nursing home that showed his cancer was in regression. Cynthia’s father was healing. There was no reason he would call an old friend and ask him to kill him.

I knew Richard was lying and he had killed Cynthia’s real father to prevent him from telling his daughter the truth, but once again, I lacked evidence. I had no way of proving to Cynthia that she was being deluded. It was a debilitating feeling, so I diverted my attention to other aspects of my personal life.

America was beautiful and welcoming but it still did not feel entirely like home. I was constantly on a roller coaster of missions, solving mysteries, carrying out dangerous investigations and occasionally, in concert with local authorities, stopping major attacks from taking place. I missed home. I missed my mother. One year after I arrived in America, I procured unregulated travelling documents. I immediately used the untraceable passport to travel to my birthplace.

London was still the same as I had remembered as a child. I knew where my first stop would be. Directly from the airport, I rented a vehicle and drove to the cemetery my mother was buried in. Although the last time I had been in that country was over a decade earlier, I remembered the landmarks. It did not take me too long to find the spot she lay beneath. It was covered in shrubberies and looked abandoned. My heart sank to see such unkept appearance of the graveyard. I decided to pay my respect and spent the rest of the day clearing dead leaves from the surrounding headstones. I spoke to my mother and told her a small part of what I had gone through since she passed away. There was so much more to tell. I returned to the graveyard early the next morning to continue my story. I felt it so urgent to inform my mother that her son was safe and was independent. I knew she must have been worried. Still.

For weeks, I visited the site regularly. Until the tranquil aura of the cemetery was broken one evening. By the sound of heavy gunfire. I ducked behind an ancient gravestone and tried to find the source of the shooting. Two masked men were using submachine guns to spray bullets in my direction. They were inside their vehicle, using the open car windows to shoot. I was unarmed and totally

pinned to my spot. After ducking for five minutes, I saw that piece of the headstone in front of me were shattering. I quickly improvised and took off my jacket and placed the clothing over one of the smaller gravestones in such a way that it looked as though a person was lying prone against the granite slab.

The ruse worked. The gunmen who had ambushed me disembarked from their vehicle and approached the gravestone. When they were within my arm's range, I leaped on them and used hand combat to disarm the men. I used no lethal force to detain them, tried to find out who they worked for. The gunmen appeared to be professionals and did not volunteer any information.

I called the Metropolitan Police and handed them over. British police thought I was playing a prank on them, and asked me what was bloody wrong. Confused, I begged them to clarify. They told me they had received an alert about me. The anonymous tip came from an untraceable number and it mentioned that a dangerous man would visit this grave and should be shot. The gunmen who were firing at me were British agents who were under the impression that I was a terrorist. The police chief wanted to arrest me but I calmly explained the situation and told him it must have been a mistake. This was my mother's grave that I have been frequenting for years. I was no threat to England. Somehow, the police superintendent believed me and I finally was able to convince him to have a look at the anonymous tip that had come to his station. The message was indeed scrambled heavily but I made a copy of the tape and sent it to Dustin. My hacker friend got to work right away and began to trace the origin of the message. I knew whoever was behind the horrific act of desecrating my mother's grave also wanted to have me arrested or shot by the British police if I showed up and tried to stop them. I needed to know who was so viciously after me and my family.

Five days later, my friend Dustin contacted me. His usual jovial tone was suppressed. I wanted to know what he had discovered. Hesitantly, the Russian hacker broke the news to me. He was able to decode the voice scrambler and identified the deep voice of the speaker. When I hear the original recording, my blood froze. It was Cynthia's father! His lisping long *o* accents was unmistakable. Although he had immigrated to America as a young man, Richard's Austro-Hungarian roots were clearly noticeable in his manners and accents. I knew Cynthia's father was often threatened by me and may have even grown to resent me, but I didn't understand why he would hire people to exhume my mother's grave and disrespect the deceased in such a blatant manner. What could he have gained from this ignoble act?

Since that day, I realized my mother's burial place had become a target and I had to do something about it. I used some of my saved money to hire a round the clock security service to guard the graveyard and conduct constant surveillance. The men I hired were instructed to inform me of any anomalies that they witness, no matter how trivial.

To see my mother's tranquil resting place desecrated pained me severely. I had returned to my root after so long and yet the savages who attacked me did not spare the dead from this shameless assault. I did not want my mother to suffer anymore on my account so I ceased visiting her grave. However, I spoke regularly with the security guards who were stationed to protect the cemetery.

It was on a wintry night in Colorado when I received the urgent phone call. It was from an unlisted number. But I recognized the area code. The call was coming from London. I answered the call right away. It was the head of security of the team I had hired to protect my mother's resting place. He informed me that there were numerous unidentified workers breaking the headstone on my mother's grave. The workers had a six-ton grave digging machine with them. It suddenly occurred to me that the men may have intended to exhume the grave! I was continents away, powerless to stop the marauders but I ordered my security team to stop them by any means necessary. The next call I made was to an old associate I had known after graduating from the Camp. He was one of the lucky few who passed the grueling tests and exercises and was stationed in London. I reached out to him and begged for help. My mother's resting place was being desecrated and I needed it to stop. He agreed to help and mobilized a small group to ambush the grave diggers. After an hour of firefight, the intruders fled from the scene. My mother was safe. For now.

I doubled security around the cemetery and wasted no time to fly to London. I knew the men who had come to dishonor this sacred grave would be back, sooner or later. I had to keep my mother safe from those depraved men. I had to move her from here and allow her to rest somewhere serene. This time, I did not delegate the task to anyone. I personally oversaw the delicate task and had her remains exhumed by licensed workers. As soon as they loaded the truck with the airtight coffin, I rented a private jet and flew to the only place I remembered my mom mentioning in her letters. Her father's native Grozny. I knew there was a family graveyard in the area where numerous members of her family were laid to rest including my maternal grandfather. It was true that he had disowned my mother when she expressed desire to become a model, I still felt that somehow, she would find some solace in knowing that her blood relatives are lying beside her. That she was not alone in this world. I sincerely hoped no one in the world would find out about this new burial place.

My heart was at peace knowing that my mother would remain undisturbed at her small family graveyard. Yet, as much as I knew paying respect to her grave might put the new location in danger, I could not stay away. I ended up visiting Grozny every month. My

trips were short- hours even. I spoke to no one, made no contact and conducted no business. My solo stop would be a small shed ten feet from my mother's resting place where I had personally planted an organic evergreen garden. Each time I visited, I made sure no one followed me. I took care not to answer phone calls lest my location could be pinged by a third party. I was positive my secret was safe.

Early 1979

During this time, a well-known figure became the deputy president of Iraq. His name was Saddam Hussein. Both friends and rivals considered him to be an effective and progressive politician. I became familiar with this man after noticing some unexplained missions which Richard had authorized since the beginning of 1979. From the upper echelons of the National Security Agency's black budget program, Richard dispatched five mega teams of espionage specialists to Iraq with the sole purpose of meeting with Saddam Hussein and acquiring his trusts. I was unaware of these missions, since Richard did not apprise me of any details about Iraq, but I was able to follow one of his teams and find out a lot from them. Those men who Richard sent were former CIA operatives, now working as freelancers for Richard's private group. I was curious about the political upheavals of the region, and after five months of pursuing those CIA men relentlessly, I was able to overhear their mission briefings, and the meetings they participated in. The former CIA officers met with Saddam's closest aides, and finally personally met with the deputy leader of Iraq, promising him, on behalf of Richard, that he would be supported both financially, politically and militarily if he cooperated with the NSA black budget division. In the final meeting which took place in June of 1979, Saddam Hussein agreed to abide by any rule or condition which Richard had stipulated in exchange for becoming the supreme leader of Iraq for the remaining duration of his life. Richard kept his word to Saddam, so when the Iraqi president El-Bakr attempted to unite Iraq and Syria, mercenaries working for NSA forced El-Bakr to resign, and by the middle of July, 1979, Saddam became president of Iraq. One of the first missions the former CIA operatives carried out was to identify, isolate and execute any politician or intellectual in Iraq who remotely opposed Saddam's abrupt appointment to the seat of presidency. The only political group that was permitted to remain active was the Bath Party, and Richard ensured that all the leaders of Bath Party supported Saddam and his policies whole heartedly. The next week, the same CIA group handed over the names of hundred men, and ordered Saddam to execute them in a public fashion, so the rest of the nation would never dare to oppose his authority. In a public assembly, the arrests and execution of Saddam's political rivals were carried out in a dramatic fashion, and each person on the list was promptly arrested and removed from the room, tried hastily in a pseudo court and sentenced to death. By early August 1979, Richard's CIA henchmen made sure that all of Saddam's political foes had been executed. The executions were crude, and played out like the scene of a grisly movie, but it was clear that Iraq and its new leader now belonged to the NSA.

I was personally in awe of Richard's achievements, especially since he assured me that his sole intention of controlling Iraq via Saddam's dictatorial presidency was to maintain global peace and prosperity in the Middle East. I believed it was a noble cause, and decided not to further oppose Richard with his endeavors in Iraq.

I had no desire to give too much thought to Richard and his covert missions in Iraq, and instead focused on spending more time with Cynthia, and when she was away on work or school, I spent a great deal of my time in New York City, adjacent to the apartment building in which the kind-faced Russian woman and her husband lived. It was like a part of home I had for long cherished. She reminded me of the pristine seasons and breeze of Russia and to be near the family gave me comfort. I frequented their home, and even became acquainted with neighbors. The neighborhood was a typical New York hub, with a multinational residential sector separated into ethnic groups. The Russian woman was especially close to several Iranian-American families who lived in the apartment. Some were refugees who had come from Tehran only months ago. They were a group of pleasant and well-mannered residents and I had a wonderful time visiting those craftily decorated flats that had Persian carpets hanging from the windows and doors. I enjoyed their company greatly, and listened with awe the melodious lines from ancient poetry in Farsi. During several months, my life was comfortable, until another major event in the Gulf region threatened to disrupt global peace once more.

It was September, 1980. The new leader of Iraq who Richard had placed in power had suddenly invaded his neighboring country of Iran. The warfare became bloodier every day and American news media called the conflict the Iran-Iraq War. I could not believe that a full-scale warfare had begun less than a year after the Iraqi leader became president. But it pained me to see Iranian suffering in the battle ground. The people I had visited often in this small Iranian-American neighborhood was extremely distressed with what was going on, and I wanted to do something to stop the war.

I flew over to Iraq, and made contact with two men who had been active in placing Saddam Hussein into positions of power. They both worked for Richard's black ops program, so I decided to find out what they knew about this sudden invasion of the sovereign nation

of Iran. However, after begging the operatives to reveal the truth, I finally realized that there was no use. All I found out was that Richard had sent them to Iraq with classified orders. I was not surprised to see them behave in such aloof manner. My colleagues at the CIA and NSA regularly eyed me with mistrust. It was a sad fact that the popular view in the United States of America was that Russia was an alien body in one cold corner of the world that must be resisted, rejected by society and reduced to ruin to ensure the survival of the neoliberal subjects in the Western hemisphere. Even senior government officials who worked alongside me in the NSA black budget programs believed my native land was made up of individuals or groups that acted or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end. This was all preposterous, but nothing I could say or do ever help extinguish the sheer mistrust from the minds of my colleagues and peers in the National Security Agency.

I was waiting in line to make an international phone call from a technical store in Baghdad, when a stranger accosted me. I received an urgent message from a middle-aged man. He did not give me his name, but he looked like a traditional desert Nomad. I thought he looked familiar, and I finally recalled where I had seen him before. It was in the Saudi Arabian port city of Jedda, when I was accompanying the beautiful Russian woman and her husband during their annual pilgrimage to Mecca. It was there that I became intricately involved in preventing a catastrophe related to the water well known to locals as Zamzam, situated only twenty meters from the temple of Abraham.

The Saudi Arabian man who was standing in front of me looked visibly agitated. He spoke English with an accent and informed me that the Grand Mosque in Mecca was seized.

I checked my calendar. It was November 20, 1979.

How? When? Volleys of questions were about to burst from my lips, but I forced myself to remain calm. I asked him who the culprits were. The Bedouin man said all he knew was that terrorist carrying weapons inside coffins slipped in the holy mosque and took the entire area as hostage, including fifty thousand pilgrims who had arrived to perform the annual pilgrimage. One of the princes who I had personally assisted during the Zamzam crisis had ordered this man to bring me this message, requesting my help in resolving this crisis. They thought since I had helped them in saving the Zamzam well from being blown up a month ago, I might be able to help resolve this catastrophe. The Saudi man further told me that there are nearly a hundred terrorists in the Grand Mosque, all disguised as pilgrims but were carrying Kalashnikov assault rifles, Belgian automatic rifles, hundreds of magazines and various other ammunitions which they brought in using the coffin stretchers.

The armed takeover of the Grand Mosque of Mecca was a shocking incident. I found it difficult to believe that the holiest place in Islam became a killing field. I had been to Mecca to prevent the destruction of the Zamzam water well only a month ago, and while Richard admitted that he had set those detonators in the holy fountain, he insisted that his intentions were pure and noble. He had no wish to destroy the ancient well, which had been flowing since the time of Abraham, but Richard suggested he had hoped to divert the water away to a neighboring country in order to commercialize the mineral filled water and sell them in the global market.

I shook my head to clear my thought, and then promised the distressed man in front of me that I would try to help him, and immediately booked a flight to Washington D.C. and met with Richard. I knew I needed his help to solve this issue. This was a huge rescue operation, which I could not possibly undertake on my own. I also needed a tactical NSA team to accompany me to Saudi Arabia. Richard listened patiently as I explained the situation to him. He did not seem the least surprised and only commented that it would be very nice to see the Saudi Royal family abjure their kingdom. I entreated him to help me anyway, and Richard nodded, and moved away from his desk to make a phone call.

I leaned against the table to rest my head, when an open folder caught my attention. It was a profile of an operative, along with a picture and five other aliases. The man's name was listed as Balázs Dewavrin, a Hungarian-French intelligence officer, who was an undercover employee with Richard's clandestine reconnaissance division within the American National Security Agency. His previous employment showed him to be a para-rescue man in the French Air Force's special operations community. The Hungarian-French man was highly-skilled, with firm knowledge of nine languages, including French, Dutch, Spanish and Arabic. I quickly glanced over the list of five aliases Balázs Dewavrin was authorized to use. István Tadam, Gregory Whitman, Anwar Belouizdad, Ramón Klapisch and Juhayman al-Utaybi.

I repeated the name aloud. Juhayman al-Utaybi. Was not this the terrorist who had posed as the anti-Christ and placed the Grand Mosque under siege? I froze in my seat, unable to speak. My hearing must have temporarily failed for I did not hear Richard calling me. He apparently called my name and when I did not reply, he approached me and placed a hand on my shoulder. Then he saw the file I had

been perusing. I jumped to my feet and demanded an explanation. Richard shook me by the shoulder and spoke fiercely, explaining that Balázs Dewavrin is a good and honest man, who agreed to help him overthrow the Saud royal family and restore democracy in the oil-rich nation. I wanted to know why he ordered his agents to pose as Arab militants, and recruit local terrorists to lay siege to the Muslim holy city, and Richard insisted that this masquerade was necessary. He assured me that Balázs Dewavrin and his men had orders not to kill any civilians, and they will hold the fifty-thousand pilgrims as hostages until the Saudi king resigns. I begged Richard to call off the attack and give the order to release all hostages from the Meccan grand mosque, but he staunchly refused, saying that I was a stupid Russian boy who did not understand the importance of world domination.

For months, Richard constantly showed me solid and irrefutable proof that helping the NSA with its cause was going to save countless lives. But I could not come to peace with the idea that while helping Richard, in some strange way, I was on the side of the enemy. This pained my conscience, constricting my heart every time I thought about it. My twofold treachery was overwhelming, as though the pressure of conforming to his will was choking me like two giant pincers crushing my throat. I could not bear the agony my heart was experiencing, and I rushed to the window of Richard's office, and vomited violently.

For the next week, I ran back and forth to meet several French friends who were now members of the elite fighter Legion. I told them all the details I learned from the file in Richard's office, and told them who the man claiming to be Juhayman al-Utaybi really was. They knew Balázs Dewavrin well, and one of the French officers said that he would contact the Saudi king and personally launch a rescue mission to rescue all the hostages from the grand mosque and arrest all the mercenaries. Two weeks later, the mission had been successful. I was relieved to know that the French officer kept his promise and saved the holy city from further destruction.

I later learned more intricate details about the plot, and found out that in the early hours of November, 20, 1979, several hundred mercenaries dressed in Arabic clothes and posing as traditional Muslims, blended into the crowd of fifty thousand pilgrims who came from all over the world to perform pilgrimage, and as they all entered the holy mosque for the pre-dawn prayers, the mercenaries sneaked in heavy armaments which they hid craftily inside coffins. Local security assumed that a mass funeral prayer was about to take place and did not attempt to search the deceased. The mercenary leader responsible for the Grand Mosque siege was Balázs Dewavrin, Hungarian-French intelligence officer, who posed as a charismatic Muslims preacher assumed the fake name of Juhayman al-Utaybi. It was his job to pose as an Arab anarchist and overthrow the legitimate king from the Saudi throne, and assume command of the desert nation. One of Balázs Dewavrin's loyal adherents who accompanied him in this terroristic mission was his wife, Jeanne-Marie, who was also fluent in the Arabic language and assisted Dewavrin in organizing the security. Balázs Dewavrin and his wife arranged for their trained snipers to block all entrances inside the ancient building and set up firing points on the high minarets of the mosque, with orders to shoot to kill any security officers who dared to approach the perimeter.

According to the surviving eyewitnesses, the mercenaries used the funeral prayers as the ruse to begin the siege. After the Muslim priest stood to read his prayers in the courtyard surrounding the temple of Abraham, Balázs Dewavrin shoved him aside and proclaimed himself the anti-Christ who was sent by Jesus, and declared that the time had come for the fulfillment of the ancient prediction about the Judgement Day. In flawless Arabic, he introduced himself as a native Saudi citizen by the name of Juhayman al-Utaybi and insisted that he was the el-Mahdi, the biblical anti-Christ, sent from heaven to save the world from tyranny.

When some of the pilgrims questioned why he was shedding blood within the Sacred Mosque, which was directly in violation of the commandments and norms of Islam, the imposter replied that while violence on sacred land was strictly prohibited in general, he was the Christ's deputy on earth and had the right to kill anyone who opposed him.

I recalled personally that during my visit the previous month when I repaired the Zamzam well, local police warned me of the sacredness of the place, and sternly reminded me that visitors were not even allowed to pull out weeds from the soil of Mecca, let alone hurt or kill. It was indeed strange that a man claiming to be a devout Muslim would ignore this commandment, but very few people in the intelligence world suspected that the man calling himself Juhayman al-Utaybi was actually a Hungarian-French intelligence officer, Balázs Dewavrin, who had served under the direct tutelage of Richard for over a decade, before the NSA black ops division had even been created.

In the year 1979, November was a terrible month for me.

While the crisis in the Grand Mosque of Mecca was unfolding, terror continued to rain down upon the Arabian Peninsula. Iraq and Iran were embroiled in yet another bloody conflict, and once more, there was little I could do to stop it. The new Iraqi president was Richard's protégé so that weekend, when Richard invited me to join him for dinner, I accepted his invitation and arrived early to discuss

the Iraq crisis with him. Richard ushered me into the tastefully decorated dining room. It was a beautiful house, but what arrested my attention was the life-sized painting hanging from the wall directly across Richard's main seat at the dining table. It was a picture of an old man being breast-fed. Richard noticed me staring and commented that one of his dear friends who was an art dealer purchased this painting at a bargain price of thirty million dollars. It did not surprise me for I knew in the art world, Richard was well-known and had several legendary gallerists among his close friends. I merely reminded him that I have seen the same painting in two of Richard's other residences, but he then explained that each one of those paintings was done by a different artist, and also wryly expressed astonishment at my lack of keenness in art. I learned from him that pigeons were shockingly good at art, and when shown Picasso and Monet, those birds could differentiate between the two artists. It was interesting, and I knew Richard liked to collect rare paintings and obviously this was no exception. I gave no further thought to the hanging image behind me and soon after, thanked Richard for the rich dinner and then broached the subject of the Iran-Iraq war. I requested him to use his influence to stop Saddam Hussein from attacking his neighboring country. However, Richard was uncooperative, and insisted that Iranians were a terrorist nation that needed to be wiped from the face of earth. I protested vigorously and told him about the Iranian-American neighborhood in New York. I told Richard that Iranians were very peaceful and that he should stop Saddam Hussein from attacking and killing them. But Richard glared at me for a long time, and then said that I will very soon find strong evidence proving that Iranians are a dangerous nation. The next day was Sunday, so I decided to spend some time with Cynthia. We boarded a plane and took the local flight to Florida. While deplaning, I noticed the large television screen flashing in the airport. It was breaking news.

The reported was airing live from Tehran, standing directly in front of the American Embassy.

The agitated journalist spoke to the camera, announcing that only hours ago, a group of militarized Iranian college students had stormed into the U. S. embassy in Tehran and took more than fifty American diplomats as captives. The frightened civilians were being held hostage after the radicals who supported the Iranian Revolution initiated this diplomatic standoff ensued. I froze in my place. My blood ran cold, as I remembered the previous night's conversation I had with Richard over our dinner. He warned me that soon, I would witness some very disturbing things happening in Iran, which would make me hate them. He also assured me that I would support him and approve of Saddam's invasion of Iran. How did Richard know this crisis would take place? Why had he warned me something like this would take place? I did not know what to think, but my brain was already tired from the endless turmoil this little earth was facing.

It was Sunday afternoon, and the date was November 4, 1979.

New Year's Eve was not a happy affair for me. I found no joy in greeting the year 1980, especially since I felt woefully helpless in my despair and my inability to resolve any of the major conflicts that were taking place. Yes, it was true that I partially assisted the French forces in joining the Saudi police in ending the Meccan hostage crisis, but I was now in the middle of another one. How ironic it was that in the same month, two groups of belligerent mercenaries would dramatically seize hostages in seemingly untouchable targets? The siege at the Grand Mosque and the hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran? Early next year, the White House authorized a rescue mission and senior members of the NSA were involved in the plannings. They had decided to fly in four super-choppers loaded with tons on arms and ammunitions and drop fifteen spec ops over the target area and rescue the hostages. Richard had been vehemently against the hostage rescue plan, and openly denounced any attempts to free the Americans who were trapped in the consulate. He also warned the military officers from Pentagon that the helicopters may be shot down at the Iranian border. But the military operation to rescue the American hostages went underway on April, but the four helicopters that took off from the Iranian border were shot down by unidentified surface-to-air missiles. Eight special forces agents were killed instantly and two others died days later from trauma-related injuries. The politicians in Washington made diplomatic appeals to the Iranian government but all efforts ended in failure. The American government did not want the world media to find out that the helicopters were shot down, so they released a press statement, claiming that all four of the helicopters suffered from engine failure, so the military voluntarily canceled the rescue operation, and ten of the servicemen died after their helicopter accidentally collided with a C-130 transport plane, and there was no foul play to be suspected. The truth was far more complicated, and only after two years I found out the truth, and identified the man who fired the rockets at the American rescue helicopter. He was working as a freelance mercenary for the NSA black ops director. Richard had personally given him the order to shoot down any plane that tried to rescue the hostages and end the crisis prematurely.

In the midst of all this horror and chaos, I did not forget my true love.

Cynthia was still very present in my heart, and I thought of her all the time. She asked me what I thought about marriage, and I said it was a very good idea.

I decided to work on resolving the Iranian hostage crisis after I cleared my mind about our relationship.

It was early in the 1980s that I broached the topic of marriage with Richard. As per his cordial manners, Richard once again invited me to his house to partake dinner with him and Cynthia. I greatly looked forward to my weekly dinners, because I never felt such warmth and respect from anyone before, and Richard genial ways and manners greatly humbled me. I considered myself to be luckiest man in the world to have a father-in-law as kind-hearted as he was. This week, he asked me to join him for the meal at his lakeside bungalow in southern Pennsylvania because Cynthia was away in Europe for a photo-shoot with her modeling group. I knew Cynthia enjoyed modeling for small magazines and other prints, so I felt that this would be a perfect opportunity for me to ask for her hand in marriage. I eagerly arrived at his bungalow an hour before supper time, and his housekeeper let me in. After waiting in the beautifully decorated lobby for several minutes, I decided to see the rest of the house. It seemed spacious enough, and the intricate tapestries hanging from the living room window caught my attention. They were Byzantine style. Numerous paintings hung from the walls. I proceeded to study the first one, but recoiled in slight shock. It was a rather disturbing painting. I then went to the other room of the small house, and again, I came across similar oil paintings. I knew Richard considered himself to be an art connoisseur and he always asked me to retrieve art pieces for him, but I found it disturbing why he kept several near identical paintings in each of the rooms in his bungalow. Cynthia's father once told me how the painting of Hans Sable Beham was one of the most expensive paintings in Europe and told me how he purchased the painting with his life's savings. I was surprised to see it showed a young woman breastfeeding her father.

I was still feeling disturbed and when Richard arrived for the dinner, he cheerfully greeted me and saw that I had seen the paintings on the wall. With great excitement, he explained how he has more interesting art pieces in the dining area, and led me to the room. Again, Richard proudly displayed five large paintings. I again was speechless when I saw what the images were. Richard gestured at a floor-to-ceiling watercolor painting, and said it was a custom painting done by Peter Paul Ruben. The small note below the bizarre painting hanging from the dining area of Richard's home showed a daughter named Pero breastfeeding her father whose name was Cimon. I was flustered by the art pieces but did not question Richard's logic or judgement. I was no expert in art and paints, so I thought Richard's refined and educated background led him to acquire unique tastes in the world of arts which I failed to appreciate. Cynthia's father indicated that it was meal time, and I quickly ploughed through the dinner and left, almost forgetting to ask Richard permission for marrying his daughter.

The Iran-Iraq conflict was brewing but American operatives were conducting daily meetings with State Department officials and Senators from both Republican and Democratic parties. I felt confident that they politicians would be able to use the international community and resolve the war before it claimed too many casualties.

Richard called me on my private line and asked me to fly his personal helicopter over to a villa near the Mississippi River. It was a resort area which he often frequented with his daughter. As I was a professional flier, and was trained to be a pilot in my undercover job at the Soviet Union, I welcomed any opportunity to fly airplanes or choppers for Richard. It was a service I was glad and honored to perform. It made me happy to serve Richard, especially since he had done so much for me. I was a Russian at heart, and it was in our nature to repay the smallest favor with honest gratitude. I knew he had saved my life from utter peril numerous times, and for that, I was prepared to cut the skin off my back and make shoes for him, because to me, he was more of a father than an employer. I secretly made an intention to meet him in his Mississippi villa and ask him to bless my marriage with Cynthia. It was only a week earlier that Cynthia made me the happiest man on earth by agreeing to become my wife, and now I wanted to honor traditions and formally seek her hand from her father. I felt that it would be only fitting for a great man like Richard to become my father-in-law. At least, legally I would owe him my eternal appreciativeness.

With such happy thoughts, I flew the chopper for five hours and landed on the helipad behind the large villa. Richard was lounging in the swimming pool of the rear garden and was being served drinks by a waiter. However, the young man was not uniformed and was dressed in swimsuits. When I disembarked, Richard quickly dried himself and invited me inside the house. I promised to join him in a moment after taking care of the chopper properly. After a few minutes, I completed the maintenance check and was about to walk inside the house, when I came across a young man trimming the grass around the property. I normally would have ignored a worker, but something about him made me suspicious. The young man was wearing only a very bright red underwear. I considered it to be a risky endeavor to use a powerful machine to trim grass wearing no protective pants or gears, so I went to the man and asked him why he was not wearing any clothes since it was dangerous for him to be near a blade without proper clothing. The youth smiled and said he was the gardener, and he always cuts grass in these scanty outfits. He told me not to worry, because he was just following orders.

"Whose orders?" I asked sharply.

"Richard promised to pay me five times the normal rate for doing this gardening work without wearing anything except this red underwear."

"Richard personally asked you?" I wanted to clarify. I was naturally thinking about how artistic Richard was so this request did not surprise me. He probably wanted to create artwork for his canvases. It was on a previous occasion that Richard told me how he often sketches men and paints images of them. I said nothing more to the gardener who was still shaking.

The youth nodded vigorously to my previous question, confirming he was wearing a red underwear on Richard's clear directives. He shivered slightly as he spoke, and I knew the wind near the lake was very chilly.

Cold water overflowing from the adjacent swimming pool lapped over the top of my boot, freezing my feet and I could imagine how cold the young man must have been feeling. I took off my jacket and asked the young gardener to wear it.

"Oh no, sir! I could not wear your jacket. You see, my boss said he would fire me if I trimmed the grasses of his backyard without wearing only a red underwear."

"You will catch pneumonia," I warned him, but the young man brushed my concern aside and continued with his work.

I decided not to force him to wear my jacket and went inside the villa to join Richard.

He was on the telephone with someone, so he gestured towards the settee, motioning me to make myself at home as he completed his call. I walked leisurely into his sitting room to admire several unfinished canvas and artwork Richard was working on. I always admired his skill in painting, because it was one of the things I never learned properly. Beside his reading table, I noticed an unfinished sketch. It looked oddly familiar. Then I saw that it was the initial framework of a full nude paint. And the face of the painted person was identical to the young gardener who was mowing the lawn in his red underpants. I finally understood why Richard ordered his employees to remain without any clothing. He was indeed a very gifted artist and wanted to paint their nude bodies for his collection. I went back to the sitting room and saw that Richard was exchanging pleasantries, and ending his phone call.

Five minutes later, he hung up, and had a grave expression on his face.

I cleared my throat and abruptly mentioned that I had asked Cynthia to marry me.

Before I could finish my sentence, Richard raised his hand to stop me. "We can discuss that later," he snapped, almost angrily. Then he took a deep breath and controlled himself. "Listen, I have a very important mission for you," he began more calmly. "Please try to complete it properly, as I totally depend on you for this to be successful."

His soft and worried tone alerted me, and I immediately promised to help him with anything he needed.

For the next half hour, Richard explained how he needed an important job to be done in West Africa. He explained that a rival corporation was trying to steal his revenues from a lithium mining factory in three African cities and he needed all those bond and banknotes returned safely to him.

I was partly disappointed because I had just asked Cynthia to marry me, and I did not want to go to another risky mission and endanger my life and remain apart from Cynthia, but Richard seemed genuinely worried, and I knew he trusted and depended on me. As a man who would soon be my dearest father-in-law, I agreed to go on this mission and began a swift preparation.

Richard saw me off at the tarmac of the jetport, and before I boarded the private plane, he reminded me of the importance of this mission. "Remember, there are over a hundred million dollar worth of cash and goods which I need urgently."

"The entire amount is still in Africa?" I inquired.

Richard nodded. His short stature looked even more heavy, as though a great strain was weighing down the shoulders. "My shareholders and partners in this business venture had cheated me of my part of the investment, and now everything I earned, all the money I was supposed to get is on some obscure part of that continent. You must retrieve it for me. Every cent of it."

"If the situation becomes too dangerous, and I have to abort, will it be okay to retrieve one of the lump sums from one depot only?"

"No!" Richard shouted suddenly, before quickly lowering his voice. "What I mean is that every penny in there belongs to me, so you have to bring it all. I need it urgently for some business."

"What business?" I asked without thinking.

Richard heaved a long sigh. "Well, I hoped to keep my philanthropic work a secret, but since you asked, I had planned to use the money to build a cancer hospital for the children of refugees."

"You are?" I asked, stunned by the generosity of Richard. With renewed veneration, I said, "May I ask where this hospital will be located?"

"In five separate West African cities. I hoped to organize a number of state-of-the-art orphanages there as well." Richard sighed impatiently, his lisping Austrian accent becoming more pronounced. "Look, I would not have asked you to go into the midst of such

dangerous region and potentially get involved in the local conflicts if I thought there was any other way. Thousands of children will be saved if you are successful."

"I will follow your exact wishes," I assured the elderly man with utter conviction.

Inwardly, I felt a surge of pride at being able to serve Richard and assist him in such a benevolent cause.

Richard handed me a thick file with all the relevant information about his business interests in Africa. My first stop was scheduled to land in Entebbe International Airport and take a train to Kampala.

I already knew about the ongoing Luwero War, and the region was considered volatile. Only international aid groups were permitted in and this made traveling difficult. I used the identity papers Richard provided for me, which identified me as a journalist.

Uganda was in the midst of a fierce battle, and there were dead bodies everywhere. Children lay wounded beside roadside ditches, while armed men prowled the alleys. I saw an elderly man lay half-curved, half-raised on his side. He was in terrible pain, clutching the blood-caked dressing on his abdomen. His groans sounded terrible so I paused to help him. I spoke in English but he did not reply. The old man's eyes were unseeing, and his sight was turned inward with pain.

It was one of the many heart-wrenching episodes I faced in Uganda. I was still miles away from my destination and found it more and more difficult to navigate through the dangerous cities. The battles I witnessed later became well known as the Resistance War. It was a bloody conflict, with the official government's armed wing fighting desperately against the rebel groups.

The protests against government officials began soon after the results from the Ugandan elections of December 1980 were officially announced. The country had just recoiled from the Uganda-Tanzania war and was restoring democracy, but the elections did not go as smoothly as planned. The president was declared illegitimate and election results were strongly disputed by other candidates. Opposition political groups claimed electoral fraud, and launched armed rebellions against the elected government.

The bloodiest armed uprising was taking place in the northern parts of the country. I consulted my map and noticed that the safe house where Richard asked me to retrieve his gold bars from was located in Moroto. I did not know where Moroto was, but after speaking to several local guides, I soon discovered how dangerous the place was. Moroto was a contested territory, only a hundred kilometers from the Kenyan border, and several towns in the area were ruled by mobs and rival factions of the opposing rebel groups. No one agreed to accompany me there. Only one Ugandan farmer agreed to transport me half the way. Others warned me not to go, but I knew I had to do this for Richard. He desperately needed the money that was in the safe box, so I needed to return his hard-earned wealth from this volatile region. I felt terrible about how his shareholders and partners in the mineral mining venture had cheated him of his share of the profit, and I was prepared to trek to the darkest part of Africa alone if necessary, and complete my mission.

Prior to my departure, I stopped for transit in Berlin to pick up some material for my journey. I required high-powered binoculars, bullet resistant outfits and several pieces of light weapons for my personal safety. A former associate who trained me during my initial years at the Camp was at the airport to greet me. He was Wilhelm Raeder, a senior officer at the *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung* and offered his assistance for this African mission. I refused, and told him that Richard wanted me to complete the task on my own. My German friend wished me luck and said I could contact the HVA headquarters if I needed anything because they had many trusted operatives in Africa who would be able to provide me with vital support. The HVA was the foreign intelligence service of the German Democratic Republic and they maintained a tight network of skilled agents throughout Europe and Western Africa. I thanked Wilhelm before departing for my destination in Uganda.

I continued to travel by the side roads. Uganda was still bearing the brunt of a brutal sectarian warfare, but the picturesque scenery of the countryside was stunning. When I was less than twenty miles from my destination, I heard the announcement that the legitimate leader had already been overthrown in the coup d'état and the country was now in a state of complete chaos.

The armed uprising against the former elected government was no longer being led by several armed opposition groups, but ordinary criminals and weapons smugglers of western and southern Uganda began to shoot and kill random citizens with impunity.

I was robbed by armed men, who seized my wallets, identity papers, and the last bottle of water I was carrying. The second time I was surrounded by muggers, there was nothing of value on me, so they stole my leather boots and smashed the end of their rifle over my head before leaving gleefully. I managed to get to my feet, but there was a lingering headache over me and I was thirsty. I knew my destination was only fifty miles away, so I set off on foot. Richard had described the area and assured me that his business partners had stored all their gold bars inside one of the school houses in this town. The stash was supposedly hidden under a tombstone. I was unsure

how I would locate the treasures, but I could not let Richard down. He was depending on me, so I trudged on. However, travelling in the arid region without any foot wear was far more difficult than I had imagined. Within minutes, my foot began to ache terribly as the ridges of steely rock cut viciously into the soles of my feet. The cruel granite rocks, breaking off like burning coal, lay harshly before my feet, as though daring me to move forward. I wanted to sink to the rocky ridge and wait for the inevitable death, but common sense dictated otherwise. I had to keep moving. I had to go on and find the town and seek help. Sharp rocks stabbed at my toes and I stumbled ahead blindly, staggering wildly about with outstretched arms, fighting to keep balance. As I walked, tears sprung into my eyes. My feet were red and bloodied, and I burst to tears thinking of my hopeless situation.

I saw a small sign in the middle of nowhere. An arrow was adjacent to the word, border. I knew I was at the border crossing, but the markings on the road had disappeared so I continued to walk towards the direction the arrow indicated.

When I finally reached my destination, I found the old school houses to be deserted.

The tomb in which Richard's business associates hid their wealth was directly ahead, about three miles north on the high grounds. I had one more hill to climb before my task was done.

I began to trek cautiously, taking care to protect the soles of my feet from acquiring further blisters. I climbed very slowly over the rocky and dry earth, but could feel the sharp thorns of fallen tree branches pierce my legs. It seemed that years of drought had transformed this part of Africa into a barren land. Spells of bitter heat had dried up the earth so thoroughly that it resembled jagged rocks. Stamping against them, I moved ahead, and tried to keep my balance despite the pain, but fell down several times. Dehydration was setting in, and my head swayed in weakness. Twice, I had to fling out my hands forward to save myself from falling directly on my face and get cut by the hot jagged ends of the rocky ground. I hastily go back to my feet, but there were already multiple scratches on my legs and feet. I forced my body to drag itself over the rocky hill and used my hands to crawl up the steep edges. Now, the palms of my hands were also bloodied and stinging in pain. Just as I was about to give up, I slipped near a fissure of rock and slid slightly to the other side. There, less than twelve meters away, I saw the tomb. It was a small mud-brick structure. Although my body was riddled with raw pain, I began to walk quickly to the rectangular enclosure, and paused by the entrance to study the place. The door was made of tempered steel, with grotesque carvings of ancient hounds and beasts. Wooden carvings were also deeply set on the frames of the door. I raised a hand and pushed. The door swung open. My heart skipped a beat. I knew there were supposed to be hundreds of gold bars or coins hidden inside this structure, but it was strange that there would be no security around. Not even a lock on the door.

I kicked the door wide open and entered. It was pitch dark inside. Then in an instant, bright lights filled the tiny enclosure, and in the dazzling glow of numerous flash lights, I saw scores of faces! There were nearly thirty African locals inside the tomb. Nearly all of the men were brandishing automatic submachine guns.

I was almost certain that my severe thirst and exhaustion had caused this hallucination, so I turned to exit the small room.

But suddenly I could not move!

There were hundreds of them surrounding me. I knew fighting would be useless so I tried to run, but immediately felt myself dragged down, helpless, through a burning hot smoke of darkness. With a free arm, I dug my nails into the earth and made a great effort to keep myself on the side of consciousness. Thousands of questions flooded my mind. How did these men know I was here? Why were they waiting in silence to ambush me?

These men did not look like ordinary soldiers. They did not have national colors emblazoned on their battle fatigues. I guessed they were crudely-trained militiamen. Then more men marched in. None of them wore any identifiable insignias, but were dressed in desert camouflages. Someone was dragging me indoors, and left me lying on my side. I craned my neck and saw that nearly a thousand black men lined up outside the door of what looked like a bar. Many wore colorful African clothes, but most of them were dressed in dark green camouflages.

I did not even understand what was happening at first. Lumps of blackness flooded towards me when I realized that all the men were about to take turns to assault me. In an uncontrollable passion of tears, I begged them to stop, but this made the abuse worse. The leaders of this mob cursed me and called me white swine and maggot, and he struck my groin with his rifle until I screamed without restraint.

Another group of armed men was cursing me with the dirtiest language in the world. Several African men in traditional costumes were also present. I could not imagine what they wanted with me. Another man who appeared to be a rebel leaders struck me fiercely

with a metal rod, causing blisters over my thigh. I screamed and fell to my knees. I tried to take a gulp of putrid air, trying to fill my starved lungs with much needed oxygen.

One of the men struck me violently in my crotch and the pain jerked my entire body backward. I was repeatedly flung against the wall until I was certain my shoulder blades were crushed. Heavy booted feet continued to brutally kick me, nearly crushing my testicles, and I could feel the deadly pain shooting from my stomach up to chest, making the basic act of breathing violently agonizing. I sobbed so frenziedly that my eyes were almost blinded. The other men trampled over me with force, uttering curses and insults.

Then he and two other older men took their seats by a long table, and began to arrange small blocks of gold bars on the center. I was kicked facedown to the floor, and when I tried to get to my feet, someone placed a heavy boot on my neck pinning me to the ground. Others began to leap over my body, applying violent blows to my legs. Something inside my stomach seemed to burst! I was sure my intestines were torn, and I could feel severe pain and internal bleeding filling my insides, bloating my abdomen. Saliva and blood suddenly overflowed in my mouth as I tried to swallow down the nausea growing in me.

Each man who assaulted me went to stand by the table and immediately were gifted a piece of solid gold. With insane rage and humiliation, I realized that these men were being rewarded for molesting me. But I could not fathom the reason why someone would give away hundreds of gold bars to common rebels for assaulting a Russian boy.

I was terribly shocked and frightened. My eyes swam blindly in tears as I cried out in silence. GOD! Destroy every single man who drugged me and burn every one of those men who raped me, or facilitate this vile assault on my body. Oh, God! Where is your justice? Why is the punishment of your hellfire so lenient and pitiful? How can you possibly mete out justice in a hell where there is neither rape nor degradation? What justice would Your hell serve to these men who defiled and abused my body?

I wept and writhed against the ground, trying in vain to fight off the hordes of human animals who were beating me. I sobbed wildly and prayed in anguish. Oh, the God in heaven! Crush the lowly heads of these men for eternity! Crush the bodies of my abusers to death, and then fashion for them a new body, so they can feel the pain again of getting smashed. God! Protect all the men of this world from getting abused and tortured sexually.

The void within me was so immense, that I did not notice the fresh tears that rose in my eyes. I was dying, or maybe I was already dead. Then I heard more excited chatters. From the corner of my eyes, I noticed hundreds of men arriving. They were all lined up, and ordered to wait, while two of the armed men dragged me from the dusty ground and threw me like a ragdoll over the rusty table, beside the pile of gold. He then gestured for the newcomers to enter and assault me. I wish I could describe what pain I felt that day, and what insults I faced in the hands of those animals who physically looked like humans. They were hurting me, not for any national, patriotic or noble cause, but for wads of measly cash and blocks of metal called gold.

My anger knew no bounds. Blood boiled in my face instantly. I was genuinely afraid that if I stood here without taking physical revenge, I would choke from the pain of suppressing my feelings. I felt mad with wild anger, and wanted to leap up and kill the man assaulting me with a violent blow. I wanted to squeeze his neck until there was no trace of life remaining. Every moment, the impulse of doing something rash became more and more severe and was irresistible. Because no torture in this universe can ever come near even one second of this horrific pain, of knowing your manhood is being violated and your body defiled and humiliated.

In a frenzy of desperation, I begged them to stop hurting me, but no sound emanated from my cracked lips and swollen tongue. I was certain my eyes were now shedding tears of blood.

The words they used to curse and insult me were so demeaning, so utterly degrading, that I was sure that no man had uttered such vile and vicious phrases ever before nor could any mind ever imagine those volleys of curses which spewed from their dirty mouths. Innocent readers will ever know or understand what had been done to me, because I can never defile this page with one thousandth of the suffering I was forced to endure. After several hours of receiving terrible blows to my body, I lost sensation on my skin. These men must have struck me a thousand times, until my bones were fractured, and my nerves became numb with pain. I could not feel the pain from the kicks, but only felt a serious shuddering over my body as the vibration coursed through my bones.

How can any human being ever imagine the disgust and the raging anger I felt? No, it is impossible for anyone to understand the sickening repulsive madness that I was put through! Undoubtedly! How can any human being ever imagine what sick, vilifying dirtiness a fellow man is capable of?

I was sure the end of my life was near, for no mortal could survive beating of this magnitude. Then I heard a resounding shout, as a new group of men marched in. They looked slightly different from the men who were abusing me. The newcomers wore loose tunic and most had a bronze skin, which was much lighter than the African rebels who were collecting gold bullions to assault me. I was face

down on the dusty floor, but from the corner of my eyes, I saw the shadowy figure of a tall man in a black robe. It was a priest! Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to momentarily bid farewell to life. Surely, I was dying and this priest has been called to conduct my final rites. But I heard a bellowing shout. It was a familiar angry voice. It was the unmistakably loud voice of Wilhelm. But that was impossible. I last saw Wilhelm Raeder in Germany. How did he manage to slip into the rebel territory in a priest's garb? The senior officer of *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung* began to shout orders, and in a few seconds, the entire club house turned into a battle field.

The smoke from the grenades filled the small enclosure. Gasping, I tried to stumble away from the melee. The armed militiamen fought back, with their leaders scrambling to grab the remaining pieces of gold bars. Their men continued to hammer their way toward the entrance in an attempt to escape Wilhelm and his men. As though oblivious to the danger, Wilhelm and his soldiers milled around the electrified entrance, charging headfirst in small groups. The leaders of the vile group who gave the men orders to beat me was now fleeing, visibly suffering multiple injuries, limping about the perimeter, trying to escape, while his men were lying outdoors in the rain, drawing desperate breaths of damp air into their heaving lungs.

The curtain of gray smoke cleared slightly and I clearly saw the proud and austere face of my German friend. It was indeed Wilhelm Raeder and he had come to rescue me! But it was a dream, of course. There was no logical way that a senior officer at the *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung* would come to this desolate part of Africa. How did he know I was here? I faintly heard the voice of my German friend, but could give no indication that I was alive. Would he leave here, thinking I was dead? I yearned to move and cry out but my body was dead! My bare arms and torso were burning in pain. My exposed thigh was crisscrossed with bloody lacerations. Then I felt him lift me. Two other men in white tunics and turban slowly carried me to the back of a truck. This was it, I thought! They assumed I was dead and was preparing to conduct the burial rites. Then I felt the rumble of the truck, and the ground vibrated as the vehicle sped away, racing from the horror and degradation I had endured.

After my rescue, the pain was still fresh in me as every vein in my body throbbed fiercely. Why had I ever agreed to come to this dreary, God-forsaken place? From a distance, I saw the receding countryside, fleeing away to another glitzy sunset, but the terror I experienced were fresh in my mind. Oh, the accursed and barren hill! Oh, how I hated every grass and leaf in this desolate land! I had lost my soul somewhere in the midst of this madness. When I got beaten more times than I could recall, my body suffered permanent damage. For years, I constantly felt sharp pain emanating from the center of my skull, and spreading like a stabbing blow to the front of the forehead. I had almost died that day, and was certain those men would kill me. I was afraid I would never live to see Cynthia again, and this dreary thought infused every fiber of my body, causing sharp pains to echo in my broken heart. The end of my life seemed so near, yet the torment was unending. The physical pain augmented the psychological trauma I faced.

I later found out that Wilhelm had arrived at the HVA headquarters and brought his trusted operatives in Africa to find out where I was last seen. He then recruited volunteers from an Arabic-speaking village to infiltrate the town I was being held in and with much subterfuge, was able to locate me. The operative that worked for the foreign intelligence service of the German Democratic Republic faced an additional obstacle. The town I was held prisoner in was off-limits to anyone who had white skin, so Wilhelm could not come anywhere near the place, but he dressed as a priest and accompanied the black Arabs and rescued me.

For the majority of my life, I wallowed in the desolate upland of my heart which was covered in death and darkness and my fears and tears were hidden from cold humans. It was my secret consolation to be certain that my sorrows and grief would be known only to God. Now, I only felt a terrible emptiness. Suddenly, I could not breathe. My eyes had been arrested by a grief that had no more tears. I was barely conscious but knew I was being led away from this dreadful place. I was going home. Even in my weak state, I saw remnants of death and destruction on the streets and rivers of Africa, as piles of unburied dead lay under the scorching sun, decaying flesh being devoured by wild insects. I hoped the end to the civil war would come soon, but seeing the various rebel factions and militias that were active in these territories, I was afraid that this part of Africa may face unrest for a long time.

After Wilhelm Raeder rescued me from the horrible army of men who tortured me, I was taken to a safehouse managed by foreign intelligence service of the German Democratic Republic. German medical professionals provided me with first aid because I required emergency medical attention. The doctors reported that my outer intestines had burst and I had suffered numerous hemorrhages. While I recovered from surgery, weeks later, I was still recuperating and in my dazed and sleepy state, I watched news on the large television screen that was propped to the feet of my bed.

I kept seeing a news flash about an armed hostage crisis taking place in South Kensington, London.

As though a sudden wave of nostalgia overpowered me, I began to remember the happy days of my infancy when I spent hours strolling down the alleys of London. Time in childhood now seemed to have flown swiftly and I recalled distinctly the springtime under

the blue skies of London, and how I ran up and down the cobbled streets and hanging balconies, that offered my anxious young soul a much-needed relief. As a child, I always welcomed the occasional soft sunlight and orange blossoms, and in the peaceful summer air, I could feel my mind drench with the sweetness of the season.

Now, my mind was diverted back to the television screen. The journalist reported that a group of six armed men stormed the Iranian embassy in London and took thirty people as hostages. The terrorists claimed to be Iranians of Arab descent, and threatened to kill all the embassy staff, visitors, and police officers were guarding the embassy. They made obscure demands and wanted to broadcast their demands on world television. The hostage-takers came into view on the British television channels and I was able to see them for the first time. After they killed a hostage, the British Army's special forces regiment, known simply as the SAS, conducted a daring rescue operation and rescued the remaining hostages, killing all of the hostage-takers, ending yet another crisis related to the Iran-Iraq conflict.

The London hostage incident that took place on April, 30, 1980, was another of those false flag attacks designed to smear the Iranian people in the eyes of the global media, and both the hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran and the hijacking of the Iranian embassy in London were acts of sabotage, carried out by skilled mercenaries who were fluent in Farsi language and dialects and had clear instruction to convince the media that Iranian terrorists were carrying out blatant acts of violence against defenseless civilians.

The men who stormed the Iranian Embassy in London were acting as captors under the guise of ordinary Middle Eastern terrorists. One of the men who posed as the terrorist claimed he was the eldest son on El-Saani, the monarch of a wealthy gulf nation. In order to convince the world that he was in fact the son of the Arab monarch, the man gave his detailed biography to the reporters outside of the embassy, and mentioned how he was a young prince and scion of an oil rich Gulf nation and had been educated at the famed Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. This impersonation did not sound credible to many people, and, upon investigating further, Wilhelm and his men discovered that the terrorist was in fact a free-lance mercenary who had been twice convicted of murder in his home country of Croatia.

After two days, the gunmen who placed the embassy under siege, began to say they were in fact Iranian Arabs who wanted to campaign for the sovereignty of Khuzestan Province. But it was a false cover used by the mercenaries, and soon, British intelligence began to negotiate with them and managed to end the horrifying episode.

I gradually learned how Wilhelm found and rescued me. My East German friend personally knew a handful of mercenaries in Africa. As soon as he suspected I was in danger, Wilhelm went to a neighboring town and hired several hundred heavily armed men, from a local Arab tribe to get inside the no-entry zone and rescue me, but it was becoming a complicated operation. The Arabs were not skilled and they needed Wilhelm's leadership skills to stealthily approach the heavily fortified town. My friend was being unable to enter because he was white. In that region, only black men were allowed. Wilhelm Raeder was aware of this rule, because he was personally acquainted with Richard and knew that Richard always conducted money laundering and weapons trading under the guise of Christian charity. He had set up dozens of charity groups and missionary centers to evangelize locals, or at least that was the official agenda of those organizations. Those religious charities were a cover for illegal gold mining and weapons smuggling. The priest and nuns that served in those chapels were mostly undercover operatives working for Richard's unofficial division of the NSA.

Since one of the rules stipulated by Richard was that only black men were permitted to enter the town that I was a prisoner in, Wilhelm was able to find out the identity of a Swedish priest who was in charge of the local school house. Wilhelm Raeder immediately assumed the identity of that priest and was permitted to enter the barricaded area. He appraised the situation and saw I was being brutally assaulted. There were at least one thousand armed men guarding the location, so he returned to the city and ordered the black men in the Arabic town to pretend to be rebels and infiltrate the camp. After fifty minutes of severe fight and shooting, Wilhelm and his Arab friends were able to kill or capture almost all of the men who were assaulting and beating me.

When I was out of surgery, I opened my eyes and saw Wilhelm eyeing me with concern. He saw I was awake, and he asked me who those rebels were and whether they tried to hurt me. Without thinking, I gave a passionate burst of wild tears, unable to utter one word.

I could never even mention what I have been put through. If I mentioned one tenth of what those men did to me, the ordinary and honest citizens of this world would have chased them till the end of their lives and burned them alive for what they have done to me. But I cannot describe even portion of it. What I have gone through no mouth can utter and no mind can imagine!

After being traumatized and humiliated in the unmapped African town, my soul seemed to die inside me, I was breathing, yes, but I was more dead than alive. For a time being, it seemed that I had become much like a robot, not feeling or trying not to feel the brutalities

of my captors. For weeks, I could neither feel cold nor pain, and did not know the meaning of grief and anger. I felt within me the emptiness of a dead man who was walking aimlessly in the land of death.

My rescue from the African prison camp was a relief but the trauma I had faced there made me weak and unstable. The roller-coaster of unrest taking place in the Middle East had slipped my mind. I had nearly forgotten that the Iranian hostage dilemma was still actively going on, and when I regained enough strength to walk without much assistance, I approached several senior Pentagon officers, and told them about my suspicions. They conducted internal investigations and found out that leaders of the hostage takers were not Iranian nationals, but were mercenaries who received payments from Richard prior to the seizure of the American consulate in Tehran. Those mercenaries received a written order stating that they had to pose as extremist Muslims and chant anti-American rhetoric on television so that the media becomes convinced that the men who were holding American diplomats as hostages were in fact religious zealots.

Eventually, I was able to contact one of the mercenaries who posed as an Iranian terrorist. His name was Claude Monroe, and he was a French-Canadian intelligence operative who worked alongside me in Richard's office briefly. Claude was a very serious and quiet man, and was fluent in Farsi, Arabic, French and Swedish. Luckily, I was able to send a cryptic message to Claude, begging him to come to his senses and abandon the pretense of acting like terrorists in order to make the American public hate Iranians. I eventually promised Claude that I would elicit oath from the Pentagon officials that they would never disclose Claude's true identity to any journalist in the world. No one in earth would ever know that the alleged Iranian terrorist who hijacked the American embassy in Tehran were not Iranian college students, but were mercenaries posing as Shia Muslims.

Finally, after sending in several more messages, Claude ordered all the other mercenaries who were pretending to be terrorists to release their American hostages, successfully ending the predicament. I am glad that the military officers at the Pentagon kept their word of honor, and did not tell anyone that the real name of the Iranian hostage taker was Claude Monroe, who spoke excellent Farsi, and impersonated the identity of an Iranian college student in order to carry out a mass diplomatic anarchy.

For many years, Americans and the rest of the world would remember that the hostages inside the American embassy were held prisoner for a duration of 444 days, and were released the next year.

My imprisonment in Africa was brief, but it took me a long time to recover from the trauma I had faced there.

I had suffered in more ways than I can ever describe, but what pained me the most was the degradation I faced in the hands of beastly men. When I was freed, I saw my reflection in the glass window of the car, shocked to see my haggard self. I looked frail from the long period of starvation and torture. The ill-fitting shirt on my body was still caked in blood and sweat.

The day I was able to move around without assistance, I met with my dear friend Dustin, and asked him to create a special suit for me that would keep me safe from violent men. I was not safe anywhere because men would jump to assault me in alleyways and abandoned buildings. I generally avoided places like the public rest rooms, because there would always be someone following me in to a cubicle so I did bathroom in the roadside, behind bushes or hedgerows, so men in the rest area could not rape me. I thought all men were my brothers, and they could never hurt me, but instead I saw that they were being paid millions to assault me. Then I immediately began to wear a special belt which no one could take off but myself. Dustin designed the special fabric that was impossible to rip or tear, and I fitted the reinforced trousers with custom made locks that were sown into place to prevent anyone from attacking me.

1983 Embassy bombing in Beirut:

At the end of 1982, I finally had enough proof that Richard was personally responsible for ordering the Grand Mosque hostage crisis in Mecca, as well as the organizer of the Iranian hostage crisis. I wanted him to face justice, but he refused to turn himself in to the State Department officials or the Senate Intelligence Committee. Finally, I collected all the files from Richard's office, and met a man who worked at Pentagon's Central Command or CENTCOM, the military command covering the Middle East. He told me about his trusted friend in the Central Intelligence Agency who lived in Lebanon, so I went to the CIA station chief in Beirut. He agreed to meet with me along with his fifteen colleagues. Since the CIA was a rival organization of the NSA, they were eager to learn all about Richard's illegal missions in the Middle East. Although the CIA officers knew I was a Soviet operative, they agreed to help me and record all the evidence against Richard which I gave them.

After meeting me at the American embassy, and listening intently to my report, the CIA officers expressed astonishment at how an Austrian man like Richard had so much control over the NSA, so they decided to conduct their own investigation, and instructed me to

go back to Richard's black ops division and continued to work as though everything was normal. Five months later, I was sitting in Richard's office when the television reported displayed a deadly sight of carnage. It was a live report from Lebanon. A deadly bomb attack took place in West Beirut, directly inside the American embassy! My hands shook when I heard this. The American embassy in Beirut! It was bombed! Then the reporter continued to relay the number of dead and deceased. Hundreds of people were injured and over fifty people were killed, including fifteen CIA officers along with the Beirut station chief. All of the men who met with me in Beirut six months ago were now dead! The CIA station chief who promised to investigate Richard's involvement in the Iranian hostage crisis and the Mecca grand mosque hostage takeover in 1979 were all dead.

It was April, 19, 1983.

The date flashed in my eyes. How could this happen? I immediately took a plane and went to Beirut to find out what had really happened that day.

After speaking to the survivors of the embassy bombing, I discovered that the attack took the form of a typical terrorist attack. Eye witnesses reported that a Chevrolet pickup filled with several thousand pounds of explosives crashed through the gate of the U.S. embassy in Beirut and struck the building. The blast killed more than fifty people instantly, and it hit the south side of the embassy, directly outside the place where the CIA officers were residing. This proved that someone had detailed inside knowledge of exactly where the CIA officers were at the time of the bombing. After inspecting the wreckage, I became more and more convinced that the alleged suicide bombing had a specific target, and that was the fifteen CIA officers who had started an investigation into Richard's wrongdoings. With their death, all the evidence against Richard was gone. They left no paper trail or digital copy of their report due to strict security protocols. The elite members of the Central Intelligence Agency never kept any written record of their work, and this meant that it was impossible to reopen the investigation.

I enlisted the help of my dear friend Dustin, and asked the brilliant code breaker to find out every piece of evidence and information related to the bombing in Beirut. Dustin found some disturbing details about the attack, and recovered a money trail leading from one of Richard's bank accounts to a French mercenary leader in Lebanon. That man received seven million American dollars and hired several local Arabs to make a confession video, in which they are forced to claim responsibility for a suicide bombing in the U.S. consulate in Beirut. The local Arab man who spoke on the video released two confession statements where he claims to belong to a Jihad group funded by the Iranian-backed Shi'ite Muslim militia group Hezbollah. This confession video was made two months before the bombing took place, but one of the mercenaries I tracked down admitted that he forced the Arab man to make a video to take responsibility for the attack. I asked the mercenary leader why he agreed to do such a vile criminal act and kill so many people, and he replied that it was his strict orders to make sure that the American, British and French troops who were part of a multinational peacekeeping force to enter Lebanon in August of 1982 and negotiate and maintain a cease-fire between Lebanon and Israel should feel frightened for their safety and leave the country so that more battles can be fought in the region. It was a horrifying moment for Lebanon and the innocent people who perished in the American embassy, but it broke my heart to see that once again, Richard was directly responsible for funding the terror attacks and framing Arab locals for the crime. I imagined that Richard believed if he used the identity of a pro-Iranian group terror group to give this attack in the U.S. embassy, then he could start a war in North Africa as well as eliminate all the intelligence officers of the Central Intelligence Agency who knew about his illegal operations in the Gulf region.

October hostage crisis in 1985

Dustin and two of my friends from the Colonel's Camp had accompanied me to all the covert locations in Beirut and helped me glean pieces of vital evidence, and it took me one long year to prove and present my case, but I finally found out the truth. I knew who was really responsible for the American embassy bombing of 1983.

The next year, I was eager to leave Lebanon but had to attend a dinner with my comrades in the Soviet embassy in Moslem West Beirut. They all expressed their gratitude for my help and promised to look into the case against Richard more thoroughly.

I left the beautiful country and returned to the United States. However, one day after landing, I saw a front-page report in the New York Times. The newspaper reported that Arab fundamentalists had kidnapped four men from the Soviet Embassy in Beirut, and they threatened to murder the hostages and destroy the Soviet Embassy the same way they destroyed the American embassy the previous year. I quickly scanned the article and saw that the four Russians who were abducted were all my friends who had invited me for dinner the day before! Why did someone kidnap four of my friends?! For what purpose or reason? Those four men were the only people who

knew about my investigation into Richard's illegal operations, and they had promised to gather all the evidence related to the Iranian hostage crisis.

People around the world were stunned by this news, because it was the first time Soviet nationals had been abducted in the Lebanese capital. After one of the Russian diplomats who were kidnapped was killed, Moscow dispatched the KGB's Alpha Group to deal with the situation. Alpha Group was part of a spy network, but they acted mostly as a counterterrorism team and conducted commando raids and rescue operations. The only information we had was that the Soviet diplomats were riding in official embassy vehicles when they were kidnapped in West Beirut. Officially, no particular group claimed responsibility for the crime, but at that time, no one knew it was another plot by Richard to destroy my country. As soon as I heard the news, I planned to fly back to the Soviet Embassy in West Beirut. I booked a flight via the Soviet airline Aeroflot, that took me directly to Beirut airport. Shortly after I landed, all flights were canceled. A rescue operation was underway, but since the Kremlin wanted to be cautious in using military force outside areas contiguous to the Soviet Union, they had to depend on a small team of commandos from Alpha group. The hostage-rescue operations were planned swiftly in Beirut, but due to hasty plannings, one of my dear friends, who had been the consular attaché at the Soviet embassy was killed during the rescue mission. The rest were returned safely to the Soviet Union.

The 1988 Dilemma of Pakistan:

In the midst of all the turmoil my life faced, there were still moments of small joys which I cherished. One such occasion was when the Russian woman and her South East Asian husband gave birth to a second child. It was a beautiful baby boy, and to celebrate the birth of this beautiful child, the parents took him to visit his grandparents in India and Pakistan. Naturally, I did not want to miss such a joyous occasion and I accompanied the family on this trip. For one month, they traversed through Karachi and Islamabad, Delhi to Darjeeling, Dhaka to Chittagong. Those were amazing and unique cities. The Russian woman's husband was personally acquainted with the president of Pakistan so I joined him in his meeting with the leaders. After the trip was over, Dustin informed me that a special agreement was being prepared by the United Nations which would shorten the span of the bloody conflict in Afghanistan, so I was eager to see that a peace deal was reached soon. I flew back to Moscow and met with some colleagues who agreed that it was the best option for them. They promised to discuss the special documents, known as the Geneva Accords, to settle the situation in Afghanistan. The document stipulated that the United States and the Soviet Union would serve as guarantors. The contract consisted of a bilateral agreement between these countries and I was extremely glad to be able to finalize the deal.

The next week, I was still at Nizhny Novgorod. That evening, I wanted to take a long stroll and forget about my woes, and I headed to bridge, but the old Borsky Bridge was being repaired and the crossing was closed, so I took a ride on the cable car connecting the regional center with the city of Bor. It was a memorable weekend for me, knowing I was back in my childhood home, once more eating borscht with chewy Russian bread. My nostalgia was broken by an urgent message from Dustin. The brilliant computer programmer had promised to investigate a series of recent events and update me. I dialed the international phone number and spoke directly to the programmer. In a broken voice, he informed that President Haq was killed. I could not reply. I was stunned and hopelessly shocked! The leader of Pakistan was dead! I met the spirited man only a month ago. The middle-aged leader was so energetic and full of life. Who would have wanted him to perish? I asked Dustin to find out all the details about the assassination and let me know what he had found. The next day, the Russian hacker notified me that the president of Pakistan died when his air force plane exploded in midair, killing him and thirty other members of the government instantly. The American-made, four-engine C-130, on which he was flying burst into flame without any obvious signs of sabotage.

I checked my calendar to check the date.

It was August 17, 1988.

The special American made plane which was carrying the Pakistani leader and the U.S. ambassador blew up in the air, killing all thirty of the passengers.

I did not know who was responsible for the attack, but upon returning to the United States, I went to Cynthia's house and found Richard waiting for me. Cynthia looked very anxious and worried.

He said I should immediately go into hiding!

I did not understand what he was trying to say, so he clarified that since I had murdered the Pakistani leader, I should immediately drop out of the radar and go to an obscure island somewhere in the Pacific and remain there until the manhunt for me was over.

I stared perplexed at the old man. Why was he saying such a senseless story? I had nothing to do with the bombing in Pakistan! I received the news of the Pakistani leader's death from my contacts, but Richard looked stern and resolute, and warned me that if I did not go into hiding, or run away at once, he would call the United States Marshall's Office and report me and have me arrested for the murder of the Pakistani president and the American ambassador.

I stood frozen in my spot, not believing what was happening to my life.

Cynthia avoided eye contact with me, but I pleaded with her, and asked her to make Richard understand that I was innocent. I dropped to my knees and told Richard that I never killed anyone in Pakistan and that he should help me using his NSA resources and find out who the real culprit is. But Richard shoved me aside and said I was a delusional psychopath who kills politicians as a sport. He again warned me to leave his property in five minutes, otherwise he would call the authorities to lock me up.

With tears streaming from my eyes, I turned and ran, and ran and ran until my legs felt watery and I could no longer breathe.

This was a horrible time for me. But I soon began my own investigation and Dustin used his exceptional computer skills to locate the factory where the explosives were shipped from. I spent hours combing through the security footages of the factory and finally discovered the truth. Anne Preschill, one of Richard's employees at the NSA who served as his personal assistant, was clearly visible in one of the videos, where she drove her Agency vehicle and swiped her ID card to pick up a large shipment. I immediately rushed to Susan's house, but found her front door ajar. I knew if I spoke to her, the truth would become very clear, because she would be able to tell me who had ordered her to pick up the explosives which was later fitted to the Pakistani president's plane.

I heard loud voices coming from the foyer, so I entered cautiously.

Richard was standing beside Susan, ordering her to write a confession claiming full responsibility for the death of the American ambassador and the Pakistani leader, but the woman was weeping, refusing to write the false confession. However, after several minutes, Richard pulled out a revolver and threatened to shoot her if she did not write the confession. With shaking hands, the woman began to write, and I decided that I should interfere before Richard ruined the innocent woman's life. I burst into the room, shouting Richard's name. The moment Richard saw me, he pointed the gun at Susan's head and fired his gun, splattering her brain matter all over the thick carpet.

"Why did you shoot her?" I cried in shock.

Richard brandished the unfinished confession note in front of me, and said the woman was a killer who personally killed the Pakistani leader.

I could not believe how he was speaking such a lie without any hesitation, but I knew Anne Preschill was an innocent woman who was used and manipulated by Richard into carrying out a deadly criminal act.

I did not have any solid evidence to incriminate Richard so I remained silent about what happened to Susan. I knew if I reported this to the NSA regional director or the CIA's deputy director, they would never believe the word of a Russian boy.

Many months after I was released from the American prison, I continued to remain actively involved in the policies of Iraq, and met with Richard to find out what his ulterior plans were about the gulf region. I met him in his office one morning, and was shocked to see that he was engaged in a phone conversation with the Iraqi leader, and was threatening him with massive bombardment. I knocked and entered his office.

Richard looked agitated when I entered, and he began to inform me of several urgent matters that I was to undertake in the Middle East. He had thinning wisps of gray hair around his balding head, and wore reading glasses that sat too far down his nose. While mentioning the details about my task, he once more had to tilt his head back to glance at me through the thick lenses.

Twice, I flew to Iraq to keep apprised of the political situation. I once more came across a former employee of the NSA, who was official living in Baghdad as a diplomat from the State Department. He was driving away in a large cargo truck when I waved him to stop. He recognized me and explained he was here on official business. I noticed five heavy padlocks wrapped in chains sealing the back of the truck, so I asked him what he was transporting. The man answered evasively, and my suspicion was aroused. I immediately broke the truck's lock, and checked the inventory. There were at least one hundred giant gold bullions, stamped with seal of the United States treasury. When I asked him where he got all that gold, the man replied he had orders directly from Richard to transport the gold the consulate and distribute them evenly among mercenaries who were working hard to keep order in Iraq. Those freelance criminals were tasked with overthrowing all rival political parties and ensure the Saddam Hussein remained in power. I knew there must have been some other reason why Richard would supply the Iraqi president with so many gold bars, but I could not guess his agenda.

It was November of 1987.

I remember the date because we were stranded for weeks at the airport. Early snowstorm had deluged the northeastern states. Travelling was precarious so I ventured to neighboring New Jersey. The Russian woman's family, or my foster family as I liked to call it, were preparing for festivities. I scoured their neighborhood and visited the local community center that had been decorated for a celebration. It was a christening ceremony; the woman had given birth to another beautiful boy. Such wonderful news! I didn't want to miss the festive rituals so I decided to remain in the vicinity and see the ceremony through. But secretly I wanted to see the little boy. I felt as though I just had a second brother. Never having a real family left a void in my heart, one that could be soothed by being in close proximity to a loving home and young children.

The christening ceremony was rather unusual. I was astounded to see it was taking place in the midst of a small mosque where devotees came and prayed. During the evening, a prayer call was announced and I, wanting to blend in, joined with the men to pray. I didn't know until much later that what I had witnessed was a Moslem community celebrating the birth of a child. It was an interesting experience for me and the guests noticed my reluctance in mingling with the crowd offered me refreshments and desserts. I accepted their warm gesture in kind and waited until the baby was brought to be displayed. It was a bubbly and healthy boy. I was proud of my little family. The ceremony ended after midnight when the Moslem priest recited a few lines of Arabic prayer and blessed us. Another snowstorm was on the way so I wasted no time in returning to New York. When I met Cynthia in her father's house, I told them about a unique christening ceremony I've experienced. Without mentioning where it was, I described the ritual. Cynthia was disinterested but Richard listened to my experiences with a hungry expression. Soon after, I forgot about the brief party and continued planning to move in permanently with Cynthia.

I followed the international news rather closely. A British Indian author, who had previously earned acclaim by writing a book called *Midnight's Children*, had written another inflammatory book about god and religion. It was released in the market in 1988, and many cities in Asia and Africa erupted in protests. Peaceful protesters decried the book's contents and demanded apology from the author. Some radical religious leaders denounced the book's existence. A London evening paper printed a headline calling for the execution of the Indian novelist. I was confused and worried that escalating violence could result in bloodshed. I made a rash decision to visit the author and confront him about his ideologies. When I finally tracked him down to a scall café in London, he was frightened to see me. He believed I was an assassin sent to kill him. I asked him why he should think someone was going to execute him. The writer told me about his encounter with a bespectacled old man with silver hair who had approached him months earlier and given him several pages of typed notes.

"Well, what did he want?" I asked.

"His instructions were clear," the British Indian author said. "He told me he was a great fan of my previous book and was impressed that I had won awards. He asked me to make a book based on his plot line."

"Which was?"

"I can't describe it," the writer confessed. He looked anguished. "It was blasphemous. Belittling my own faith."

"What did you do?" I pressed.

The author swallowed hard. "I told him I couldn't write something so controversial and hurtful. But he insisted I must or he'd have me shot. I was afraid, and hurriedly complied the booklet. The title was not my idea either."

"Yeah, who writes a book and calls it Satan's verse? I thought it was fake. That's why I came here." I cleared my throat and asked the writer to describe his blackmailer in detail. Before he finished, I whipped out a picture of Cynthia's father from my wallet. "Was it him?"

The author gasped.

His eyes widened in horror as he nodded wildly. "Please, don't tell him I gave away his identity. He swore he would kill me and my family if I ever admitted I wasn't the author of this terrible book."

"I am surprised you are worried about that," I remarked. "Thousands of religious people around the world also want you dead because they believe you wrote something you actually didn't write. Funny how life turns on us, huh?"

"That man, I call him Raymond," the author stuttered, "I thought... thought he was persuasive."

"Richard is always persuasive," I said without thinking, unwittingly giving away Cynthia's stepfather's identity. For a while, I believed Richard was virtually omnipotent in his capabilities.

I expected the writer to look shocked but his face was expressionless. Did he know Richard more intimately than he admitted? I had no way of knowing for sure so I decided not to press further.

Once my suspicions were confirmed, I left the whimpering author alone. His book continued to gain global fame for another couple of years.

Cynthia and I were trying to find time to get better acquainted during this year.

I wanted to believe it was a coincidence. But for years, I was trained to think like a first-rate Soviet operative. I was not permitted to assume two occurrences could be a coincidence. Indeed, the very first thing I learned in Camp was that the most fatal thought that can cross the mind of an operative in the field is to imagine that a person or a vehicle showing up at two places is a coincidence. Suspicion was paramount to survival. More than four times, I was accosted, beaten and even arrested in public places. Each time, someone I knew, or someone who was well-acquainted with either Richard or Cynthia, accosted me in public, and accused me of horrific crimes I never committed in my life.

One of these cases was related to young girl named Sally. She was the daughter of a heavy-weight champion. Since Richard was a great fan of boxing and enjoyed watching heavyweight boxers fight, he often asked me to accompany him to the fighting arena. One day, he took me to a small club in Louisiana and after the first round of fight was over, he introduced me to a boxer, who went by the name of JD, who was originally Brazilian but had become an American national. I was impressed by the man's boxing skills, so I told JD I would love to learn some defensive moves from him. The huge man said he was very busy, but if he ever had time, he agreed to teach me basic fighting skills. Two days later, I returned to fighting club. JD was there with his thirteen-year-old daughter Sally. The skinny girl looked less than ten years of age, but she was cheering her father on, while he practiced. The boxer helped me increase my punching force, and taught me how to block incoming blows. I was very grateful, and we promised to meet in this club the next week. The next week, Richard again invited me to his house for a dinner with Cynthia, and when I arrived, to my joy, JD was also present. Richard told me he invited JD and his daughter to join us, because he knew we were friends. I exchanged my greetings with the Spanish-American boxer, and thanked him for his advice and assistance in helping me learn some boxing tricks, and took my seat beside Cynthia at the dining table. In the midst of the meal, JD's little girl suddenly stood up and whispered some words into Richard's ear. I ignored them, and continued tasting my delicious Louisiana steak, when the girl shouted thunderously. I looked up, and saw she was pointing at me, with a bizarre expression. The little girl was laughing, but also screaming.

She raised her arm, and pointed at me, and screamed, "It was him!"

Her father looked surprised, and he dropped his plate and jumped up. His heavy feet thundered as he approached the girl. "What do you mean by that, darling?"

The girls shouted again, "He hurt me! This man abused me!" She was now pointing at me with both hands.

The boxer stared at me with anger, his eyes popping out of his head. He grabbed me by my shirt and shook me like a rag doll. "You animal! You Russian Pig!"

I protested weakly, trying to get away from the fighter, but he was too big and too strong.

"You assaulted my daughter!" The boxer shouted again, landing a heavy punch in my face.

"No, no, no!" I cried out. "I never saw your daughter after last week. I don't know what she is talking about!"

But my words were useless. I kept thinking about what the little girl was talking about, and who made her accuse me in the presence of her father, Cynthia and Richard. I knew children were innocent, and they would not accuse someone of assaulting them unless someone specifically asked them to. The little girl continued to insist I abused and raped her, but I noticed she was looking very happy, and again whispered into Richard's ear, before leaving the room.

Meanwhile, my brain was slowly failing, as the boxer began to beat me more fiercely. He believed his daughter, and was now slamming my face repeatedly against the dining table. Cynthia gasped as my cheek bone cracked and blood spurted from my eyes, flowing to the carpeted floor.

I don't know which pain was more terrible: the pain of being beaten to death by a professional boxer, or to be falsely accused of an unforgivable crime like child abuse.

My heart ached to see the anger and surprise in Cynthia's eyes. This was the third time she witnessed someone accusing me of crimes in her presence.

Richard cleared his throat, and suggested that maybe I was not entirely guilty, but the professional fighter continued to beat me, as Richard carried on with his meal, pretending not to notice the boxer as he smashed my face.

I do not know when the man stopped punching me, but when I became conscious again, I found myself in a hospital ward.

On duty doctors said I was under induced coma for three weeks. Apparently, Cynthia had dropped me off at the hospital, but the nurses said I did not have any visitors during this time. I tried to speak, but moving my jaws was painful, and eating was nearly impossible. One of my eyes were bandaged, and the doctor said I would need to keep the eye behind a patch for at least six months, after

which if I was extremely fortunate, I may be able to see again. Before departing, one of the nurses gave me a sheet of paper, and said my court date was set for next week. My eyes popped when I saw the note. It was a police report, stating I was a convicted child molester accused of abusing the South American boxer's daughter. Apparently, while I was in the hospital recovering from my wounds, the boxer had filed charges against me. I was facing a grisly battle ahead of me.

After several hours, I slowly began to remember how I ended up in this hospital. I recalled the dinner at Richard's house. And the vicious beating Sally's father had administered. I then remembered the little girl's accusations. Suddenly, my head cleared a little, and as soon as the nurses left, I dragged myself out of the bed and slowly walked out of the hospital.

I was innocent, and I had to find a way to prove it.

Only one thought rang in my mind: I had to find out why the girl lied about me, and why the child would claim I abused her, when I never saw her alone even for one minute. I also wanted to meet her father. I had to find out what the boxer knew about his daughter's accusations.

I halted at a payphone beside the street, and called Cynthia's home number, but there was no answer. After the eleventh call, Cynthia answered, but as soon as she heard my voice, she screamed, and said she never wanted to speak to a child molester again! I burst into wild tears after Cynthia hung up. I never felt more pained and insulted in my life. How could Cynthia not understand the accusation was false? I never even saw that little girl more than a few seconds, but no one would believe me. I knew I had to prove the truth to her so I got on a bus and stopped at several boxing clubs, and finally located a place where JD was scheduled to fight. I waited outside the boxing club, searching for any familiar faces, and then I finally saw the thirteen-year-old girl. She was surrounded by her school friends. Around ten other girls her age were walking with her. They all carried very expensive bags and wore bright silk and satin dresses. When she noticed me, Sally turned and hurried away, but her friends stayed beside the roadside. I greeted the school girls and asked them why Sally ran away. One of the older girls finally said that Sally was embarrassed, because she recently bragged to her friends about how she lied about being molested and in return, she received ten thousand dollars. This statement sounded very odd to me, so I spoke to three other girls who were playing with Sally. One of them looked a little older. She said she was sixteen, and had received a lot of money from Richard in exchange of doing some favors for him. She said Richard had asked her to make false accusation of child abuse against two other older men, both of whom were in a relationship with Cynthia. In each case, their directions were to barge in during any occasion where Cynthia was meeting those men. This girl had to cry and scream and accuse the man who was with Cynthia of sexual assault on a minor. Both times, Cynthia was horrified and immediately broke off relationship with those men, and for some time after, remained single. I realized I had become one of the victims of slander like those men who Cynthia had previously dated, so I decided to find out the truth from Sally herself. I followed Sally, and found her loitering by a bike station. She was wearing brand new dress and was carrying five expensive lather purses. I went over to her and introduced myself. She said she recognized me from the dinner at Richard's house, but was surprised to see my eyes bandaged.

I asked Sally why she lied to her father about me. The girl did not speak at first, and said she was not supposed to tell me. I told her that I already knew that she lied for some reason, and that her friends already told me what happened. Sally looked very unhappy, so I explained to her that I did not care about myself, and even if her father beat me to death again, I would happily die, only if Cynthia could know the truth about my innocence. I told the girl that if she did not tell her father the truth, then my entire life would be ruined. I asked her if she would be willing to testify in court and tell the judges that I was innocent. The teenager shook her head sadly, tears glazing her eyes. Sally finally said that she could never testify in court and help me, because she was very afraid. I demanded a clear explanation, and Sally divulged that another girl who was five months older than her was killed after she took money from Richard and agreed to accuse one of Cynthia's boyfriends of molesting her. She received two thousand dollars from Richard, but later changed her mind and agreed to tell the police the truth. When she went to return the money to Richard, the young girl was shot mysteriously by a sniper. Sally said she was afraid to help me and finally admitted that the only reason she had accused me of child abuse was because Richard promised to make her Miss Teen America if she accused me of molesting her, but she had to look very convincing so that her father did not even remotely suspect her of lying. Sally said it was her dream to become a beauty queen, and Richard would make sure she won all the titles. I had heard of this particular American beauty contest that was created for girls from the age of thirteen. It served as a training ground for young American girls, many of whom later get a chance to win other titles.

She apologized and said she really wanted Richard to make her win the beauty contest, so she would not tell her father that she lied about me.

Feeling crestfallen and abandoned, I walked away, intending to get as far away from this city as possible. My life was finished. If I appeared in court the next week, Sally would testify against me, and I would face a lifetime in a horrible American jail. I would never be able to see Cynthia again.

I returned to the small room I was renting and began to pack my little belongings. I was about to turn in my room keys to the house owner, when the someone knocked on the door. I opened it, and to my utter surprise, it was Cynthia! She looked very sad and threw her arms around me. I stepped back and asked her why she was here.

"I wanted to apologize to you," she began weakly.

"You told me you never wanted to speak to me again!" I told Cynthia, in a stern voice.

Cynthia nodded in shame. "I admit I was stupid. You could never have hurt that little girl. I should have known better."

"What made you change your mind suddenly?" I said.

"Sally came over to our house just now. She told me everything."

"Everything?" I repeated.

"Yes, Sally told me how Richard asked her to lie about you in my presence during the dinner, so her father would instinctively beat you up."

I did not speak. It was still too painful for me to think. I felt betrayed. How could Richard, whom I loved like a father, betray me in such a manner?

Cynthia seemed to have read my mind, and she said, "Listen, what my father did to you was unforgivable, but I did speak to him."

"Did Richard explain why he did it?"

"When I confronted him, he admitted that it was a mistake to pay a little girl to give false accusation against you, but he cried a lot. He really wept like a child. Can you please forgive him?"

"Forgive him?" I shouted. "Cynthia, do you even realize what he did? He paid a child to accuse me of molestation!"

"I know, I know. But my father is very protective of me, and he said all he wanted was to save me. He believes if I keep seeing you, then my life will be in danger, and you might get killed in one of your missions and I will be left alone and heartbroken."

"Maybe he is right." I sighed heavily. "Cynthia, maybe you should just stay with your father in his house and leave me alone. I can't take his manipulations anymore."

Cynthia looked horrified. "No! I came here because I want to be with you. I love you, and I told my father that I will be moving in with you soon."

"I am leaving this place, this town and this city forever, Cynthia," I stated simply.

"Then I will go with you." Cynthia said resolutely.

I agreed to take her with me, and she said she would return to her house and pack a bag with all her belongings and meet me at the central airport to rendezvous with me.

That evening, I waited at the departure terminal of the Louis Armstrong airport in Kenner, Jefferson Parish. Richard drove her to the tarmac and unloaded her bags, as I watched from a distance. Somehow, I did not feel angry at Richard anymore. Maybe he really loved Cynthia and wanted to protect her. I watched them say goodbye and Cynthia pulled her suitcase and joined me. We boarded the plane fifteen minutes later.

Our destination was Budapest. Cynthia had insisted that we go there because she had several relatives living in Hungary and they would allow us to stay. I did not object to Cynthia's plan, because she had already booked the hotels in the capital city.

When we arrived at Budapest, the temperature was just above freezing. A taxi drove up to our hotel.

Cynthia was exhausted and we retired to our room.

The next morning, I heard Cynthia shouting hysterically. She screamed and tossed all the items out of her suitcase. I wanted to know what happened, and Cynthia explained that all her cosmetics were missing. I failed to realize the importance of it, so I asked her to be calm.

"How can I be calm?" She shrieked. "I will look horrible in this plain face. All my make up is gone."

"You look just fine without the makeup," I said sincerely.

"No, I do not look decent. My eyes are squinty, and my nose is too big," Cynthia shouted. "I need concealer to make my nose look slimmer."

"Cynthia, you look perfect. Just be happy and smile and you will look beautiful."

"I cannot smile! My nose is too wide and it will spread all over my face if I try to smile. I will look so ugly."

"Did you pack your makeup before leaving your father's house?"

Cynthia nodded. "I packed several boxes of cosmetic. I am sure of that."

"Who else had access to your baggage?" I asked.

"No one. Only my father carried it for me all the way. But why would he take away my makeup?"

"I do not know," I answered truthfully. "Does Richard disapprove of you wearing cosmetics?"

"Yes," Cynthia replied slowly, "I remember he once called me a dirty whore after I put on red lipstick."

"What? When did he call you that?"

"It was the night you came for dinner, and then got accused by the little girl of child abuse. My father was angry and forced me to wash my face with soap and get rid of all traces of makeup."

"Cynthia, I am sorry. I will head to the pharmacy and try to purchase some makeup for you."

"This is Budapest," Cynthia groaned. "You will never be able to find these makeup brands here. I am ruined. I will not be able to go outside with this plain face. I will have to hide my face inside a shopping bag and visit all the historical sites like a circus clown. What a disaster!"

I tried to console Cynthia, but she remained sad. She was angry at Richard for stealing her makeup from her suitcase, but I was able to purchase some face powder in a local drug store and gave it to Cynthia.

Once her face was caked with the compressed powder, Cynthia agreed to accompany me to a boat ride along the Danube River. The magnificent cityscape was full of architectural landmarks. After two hours, we finally arrived at a 17th-century chapel in the city center.

The gothic dramatic interior was breathtaking. It was deserted except for an elderly priest who was seated at the church pews, dressed in a dark robe. He greeted us, and seemed to recognize Cynthia at once. I was surprised and the priest explained that he was a longtime friend of Richard and was told that Cynthia and I were in Budapest. He welcomed us eagerly, and offered to drive up to our hotel in his personal car.

The priest was very helpful and offered us advice on how to navigate the city streets.

He walked up to our hotel room, and spoke to Cynthia for a long time. He invoked religious discussions and insisted that Cynthia must never be angry at her father. He said Richard wanted the best for Cynthia, so she had to be patient or else God would punish her and be angry with her. But Cynthia became very upset and told the priest that her father stole all her cosmetics and called her vile names and that she hated him. No matter what Cynthia said, the Hungarian priest insisted that she behave respectfully towards her father and move back with him.

While they carried on a respectful conversation, I searched all the stores in the city for make-up or compact powder of American or French brand. I knew those were Cynthia's favorite, and being able to apply makeup meant a lot to her. I went to twelve different stores and looked for the lipstick and mascara, but since Hungary was still part of the Communist bloc and was blocked from importing western luxury items, none of Cynthia's favorite brands were available.

I returned sadly to the church to pick her up. Cynthia was getting slightly annoyed with the old priest, but to me, he seemed to be a dapper man whose widow's peak and religious vests made him appear more like a schoolteacher than a priest. He told us how he and Richard were friends since childhood, and whenever they were in Budapest as boys, the two would travel back and forth from Vienna.

Before leaving, the priest requested Cynthia to obey Richard and live with him under the same roof, in order to make him happy. When Cynthia refused his suggestion, he begged Cynthia to join a convent and take a vow never to marry anyone, and never to date me or any other man. During his lengthy speech, he accidentally let slip that it was Richard's wish that Cynthia joined a convent in Europe and remained celibate forever. This suggestion infuriated her, and she threatened to leave the priest's company at once. Although he seemed like a well-rounded, self-confident man who constantly preached words of faith and morality, occasionally I sensed that he was terribly afraid. Finally, one evening, when Cynthia and I visited him in his chapel, he begged her to go back to her father, but this time, Cynthia told him the truth, and explained how her father always beat her with a belt in order to discipline her, and that he stole her cosmetics from her bag, and hired young girls to falsely accuse me of molesting them in order to break up our relationship. The priest looked horrified and apologized purposely. He then disclosed that the only reason he was interceding on behalf of Richard was because he had promised to build thirty churches for him in Hungary, and the priest who had taken the oath of poverty, thought Richard's generosity entitled him to demand a few favors, one of which was his dearest desire to reconcile with his daughter Cynthia. The priest also said that he will no longer intercede on Richard's behalf. I got to my knees, and asked the elderly religious man to bless me, and after he prayed, we got up and was about to leave the ancient building. Just as we were about to leave, the iron-fisted secret police burst into the room. They grabbed me and Cynthia first, but the old priest threw himself at them, and distracted the police, while he shouted at me to run away as far and as quickly as possible. I did not want to go, but Cynthia grabbed my arm and we escaped through the rear exit. From a distance, I could see the secret police dragging the priest into a van and driving away.

For one week, Cynthia and I reached out to people we knew, and tried to find out where the priest was being held in. Finally, one evening, as I was watching Budapest's central police station, a young man approached me and motioned for me to follow him. He said he was observing me for the past week, and noticed that I was looking for the priest. I confirmed his suspicion and told him that I was a

friend of the religious man and would like to find and help him get released from prison. The young man then told me he was a novice priest, known as a friar, and he had served faithfully with the priest for many years. He knew the exact location where the priest was being held, but he said we did not have much time. I expressed my astonishment at his statement, and the young friar disclosed that the priest had been brutally tortured and may not survive for too long.

I could not believe that the kind old man was being tortured or that he would be executed! I wanted to help him, so I impressed upon the friar that I would break him out of his prison. All I needed was the location.

The prison where the priest was being kept in was a dilapidated two-story building. The structure was unmarked, and the men guarding it were not Hungarians. I noticed that they wore ordinary police uniforms, but spoke in different languages. Their charade was excellent, and only a keen observer could have figured out that those guards were not natives of Hungary. They were clearly mercenaries.

I had no weapons with me, so I prepared to jump the guards one at a time. I climbed on top of the exterior fence, and jumped on the unsuspecting guard who was strolling through the prison perimeter. Then I seized his gun, and silently crept to the other man who was guarding the main entrance. Marching him inside the compound at gunpoint, I was able to disarm two other guards and locate the priest. When my sight fell on him, I could not help but burst into tears. The poor man was hanging from his frail wrists, facing a moldy brick wall, his hands and feet shackled to iron pegs on the either side of the wall. I kicked the gates of the cell door, but the lock was bolted, so I shot five successive bullets and broke the lock. I jumped into the cell and gently called his name, but he did not reply. I tried to rouse him softly, but the priest was too weak and wounded to move or speak. I inspected the shackles and noticed they were permanently welded. In a controlling voice, I assured the priest that I would help him but it would take me some time to release the welded locks. My voice stirred him, and he slowly moved his head, but what I saw next drove me to wild tears. The poor man's face was smashed in completely, and his tongue had been torn out. Spikes of sharp rocks from the wall had been nailed to his face, reducing his once graceful features into a mangled lump of flesh and blood. This man had suffered beyond any level of human endurance! I wanted to say a word of comfort but was being unable to speak. My eyes were glazed with a film of tears.

I found several pieces of metal cutters in the guard house and released the shackles from his wrists and ankles. The old man collapsed to the cold stone floor as soon as the manacles were removed. I carried him to the back of parked truck and was about to run to the driver seat, and race to hospital, but then I noticed one of his eyes had been plucked out, and his other eye was staring into space. Those kind eyes were frozen, unseeing, and quite dead.

I crossed myself and knelt beside the body and tried to think of an appropriate prayer but words were lost to me. How could a kind-hearted old man suffer in this manner? What monsters could have allowed this despicable act to take place? Who could have sanctioned such brutal treatment of a man of God? Such bitter questions whirled through my head, and all I could say over and over again was that I was sorry for not being able to save him.

This good man was dead, after such terrible pain and suffering. There was nothing more for me to do for him, so I slowly walked back to the cell where he was imprisoned. The terrible enclosure was bare of amenities, and the iron chains lay uselessly on the filthy floor. Disgusted with the injustice a fellow man could administer to another, I felt ashamed of humanity itself. I turned to leave the ill-fated cell, when my eye fell on some markings on the wall. Someone had scratched messages on the stone wall, scraping out words, and roughly carving them into coherent phrases. For the next three hours, I knelt beside the wall, and memorized everything the dying priest, who lost the ability to speak, had etched on the gray stone slabs.

During his final hours, the priest had carved precious words with his fingernails, detailing his actions, and explaining his interactions with Cynthia, which he confessed were done at the behest of Richard. He also mentioned that the men were torturing him for going back on his word and betraying Richard's true intention to Cynthia.

This was how I later found out that Richard had coaxed the old priest to say those things to Cynthia, in order to manipulate her into obeying Richard's whims. However, when he refused to listen to Richard's wishes, he was taken away to a secret location, by corrupt police who had been paid one million forint by one of Richard's shell corporations. Their task was to capture and torture the priest until he succumbed to his wounds and died. He was a good-hearted fellow, and true man of God who suffered to the end without betraying either me or Cynthia. I understood that he had really believed that Richard was a good father and therefore agreed to intercede on his behalf and speak with Cynthia, but when he realized the truth of the situation and the complexity of our relationship, the priest decided to help us, even though it meant earning the wrath of his longtime ally and friend. But as soon as he ceased to serve Richard, he became a target for utmost pain and humiliation.

Even after many years, the memory of the Hungarian priest and his torturous death at the hands of hired killers makes me dissolve in grief and despair.

Wait Awhile

Alas, Death! Have patience for I cannot die!
My loved ones have dropped at your feet,
Defiled by torturous villains and foes,
They lost the echoes of their own heartbeat-
And lay strewn in their dying throes!
Profane not the memory of my comrades,
By removing me from their shrines.

Dearest death! I must not die!
For I have kindred to love; comrades to save,
My hopes are unfulfilled, my dreams a lie,
For this, oh, death, I cannot die!

Oh Death, show mercy for a while and await,
And grant me the gift to avenge the wrong.
My unsung verses to the brave I shall consecrate,
My unfulfilled dreams I shall bring along.

January, 1988

Around this time, in the end of 1988, another crisis was brewing in Europe. I was contacted by some of my former colleagues who now worked with the State Department that an impending war between Serbia and her neighboring countries were about to take place. I contacted Dustin and told him to find out what was actually happening. He discovered that a number of Serbian armed forces general and other influential men were plotting a war with neighboring Bosnia and Croatia and even parts of Yugoslavia in order to reclaim the land they had lost during the second world war. I asked Cynthia if her father knew anything about the Serbian issue, but he deflected all our efforts to intervene. Not expecting further help from him, I decided to fly to Serbia to find out who was behind the regional unrest. Cynthia was eager to accompany me on this trip. Aside from Cynthia, Dustin was the only person who went to Serbia with me.

We flew coach under aliases and landed in Belgrade without any major incident. Using documents seized from two Serbian military headquarters, I was able to determine who was behind the plot. It seemed that without consulting with the Serbian president, around six generals had made a pact to invade neighboring Bosnia, by first staging a false flag attack on their own military convoys and framing Bosnian civilians for it. I broke onto another weapons depot and took pictorial evidence of the Serbian generals' plan and made Cynthia meet with a prominent journalist in order to publicize the news. Within days, the breaking news adorned all of Serbia's newspapers and the president learned of the plots his generals undertook without his approval and subsequently he fired the military commanders and announced that Serbia would not be invading its neighbors.

Upon my return to the States, I conducted a more thorough investigation into the Serbian generals and visited one of the men in jail. He later admitted to meeting with several Eastern European weapons manufacturers who offered him a significant sum of money in exchange for starting a war with Bosnia. It was shocking for me to hear but I was relieved that we were able to prevent a major conflict in Europe.

Cynthia's father was still upset about my trip. It seemed to irk him greatly to see Cynthia accompanying me abroad. He blamed me for placing his daughter in harm's way. I had anticipated that he would try to stop me from going to Serbia so I requested his daughter to accompany me. Cynthia was more than happy to join me in the trip and although Richard had no scruples about placing obstacles in my path but he was unwilling to compromise the safety of his beloved Cynthia, and so we were allowed to travel through the Balkans unmolested.

February 21, 1989

A former handler from the Department of Defense, who had earlier assisted me with my money laundering case contacted me. He said there was an urgent meeting taking place in North Korea between the supreme leader's envoy and an unidentified party. I needed to intercept the meet and find out what the two parties were exchanging and who they were. The U.S. government believed the Koreans were purchasing materials to build an atomic bomb. I told him I was done with the espionage business and he should send an American government employee or a CIA officer but he insisted I was the right man for the job due to my obscure history. I was also told that Cynthia's father had recommended me for the job. The moment I heard his name, I gave them a flat reply. No, I would not go to Korea. It was too risky. I still recall the horrors I faced in China; I refused to be tortured so heinously by Koreans. However, the DoD man was so persistent and showed me large graphs and data, assuring me that if I didn't go and prevent North Korea from acquiring the deadly weapons, then a global catastrophe would take place.

Reluctantly I agreed. This really would be the last mission I would do for them.

The military fighter jet that flew me over South Korea air dropped me over the Korean demilitarized zone. It was the most heavily fortified border in the world, but I got through pretty easily using my false papers which identified me as a physician to the Supreme Leader of North Korea. Not having the unwavering assistance of Dustin in this mission was a little bit nerve wracking for me but I managed to find the meeting place using the map which I had memorized prior to the flight. Crashing the meeting was not the hard part; leaving the fortified area undetected was getting near-impossible. I hid the pictures of the men who participated in the meeting in my boot and followed the egress protocol, moving stealthily from safe house to safe house. It was in the third safe house that the North Korean state security officials were waiting. They didn't ask any questions and within minutes, discovered the pictures I had taken. I was deemed to be a spy and subsequently taken to the interrogation room.

If I had claimed that the Chinese secret police were the most brutal torture champion in the world, I was wrong. They were docile compared to the North Koreans. They warmed me up with mild electric shocks and began the inquisition. My interrogators wanted to know if I was a CIA officer. I answered truthfully and said I was not. The answer didn't satisfy them. They brought a large gallon of gas and ordered me to drink the gasoline. My mouth was wedged open, and a funnel was forced down my throat through which the gas was poured. It was so painful that I was compelled to spit it out. The interrogators held me down and kept pouring gas down my throat. I could feel my esophagus and stomach linings dissolving. But I still maintained my story.

The next level of torture was the scorpions.

Large Asian forest scorpions.

Dozens of them.

I recognized the giant blue scorpions right away. Those were the most venomous types. When the creature bit my arm, it felt as though every vein in my body would explode in pain. I stared at my forearm. My veins had popped, nearly bursting from inside the skin. I was surprised that the venom of the scorpion didn't kill me. I wish it had. Because what came next was far worse than what I had thus far endured.

An older man came into the room. He was carrying a glass vial with clear liquid. In perfect English, he explained to me what the liquid was. It was sulfuric acid that would be able to dissolve portions of my body. To emphasize his point, he poured several drops on my thigh. I stared in horror as my trousers sizzled and a hole appeared, biting into my flesh and tearing into my muscles. It was as though a knife was pushed into my thighs. The pain was unbearable and I screamed until my brain ran out of sufficient oxygen. I soon passed out.

Icy water was splashing on my face and I could feel cold air running over my body. We were outdoors, I thought excitedly. I opened my eyes and saw that I was tied to a long pole. A firing squad was readying their weapons. I was to be executed! It was rather unusual. I imagined spies or those suspected of espionage were kept alive for information of prisoner exchange. Surely, the Department of Defense or the CIA would have sent word. But no such help seemed to be coming. I closed my eyes and waited for the torment to end.

Without warning, I heard shouts. And gunfire. More screams and groans. My eyes flew open. The execution squad was lying dead before me. I saw no one around. Then a shadowy figure moved in. It was Cynthia accompanied by two South Korean men. She told me she found out about my assignment from her father and flew to North Korea to join me, but was captured as well. But her father immediately sent a ransom for her and rescued her. However, after securing her freedom, Cynthia refused to leave without finding me, so she used her bodyguards to start a manhunt for me and learned that my execution was scheduled for this morning. The three then held position around the perimeter and waited until the secret police were all present. The ambush was successful.

Late 1989

Less than six months after this terrible ordeal, my life was plunged into another major catastrophe. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was gradually taking place at this time and in the state intelligence sector, word was out that many opportunists and mercenary leaders were hoping to take advantage of this security breakdown in order to further their political and financial agenda. Skirmishes on both sides of the Iron Curtain continued to take place, and I was informed by trusted contacts in the NSA that someone in the Pentagon was planning to carry out a large-scale attack on a number of oil rich countries in the Middle East. Most members in the *Militärische Allianz* had been already neutralized, and although this elite organization was considered to be a crime syndicate by the CIA and her partner agencies, *Allianz* leaders, including my former employer, the feared Colonel, had tried to maintain world peace for several decades, by controlling national governments and regulating the sale of weapons and intelligence. The *Militärische Allianz* was undoubtedly involved in trading weapons, military secrets, industrial intelligence, and medical technology among European countries, but most of the logistics of this group took place in Berlin. I was personally surprised how this group was unable to prevent a large modern battle from taking place.

I found the details of this operation many weeks after it had been carried out. An ugly warfare took place when the Iraqi forces abruptly invaded the Kingdom of Kuwait in a blitz operation. I found later that the operation that took place on August of 1990, was actually being prepped for months, and many of the weapons Iraqi soldiers were using had been personally delivered to them by Richard, a man I had trusted with my life. I knew Richard was an ambitious man, but I simply could not understand why he would coax and hire vulnerable Iraqi army officers to invade neighboring Kuwait.

Prior to the breakout of this war, East Germany's Ministry for State Security was wielding great influence over world politics, but it was not officially a part of the transnational *Allianz* but the *Staatssicherheitsdienst* knew and approved of the Camp's existence. I personally knew several *Stasi* district commanders who took orders from the former Colonel of the KGB. The Kremlin hardly knew that the Camp existed, but it was nevertheless a silent but foreboding force that tried to keep the Soviet Union united, and for the most part, they succeeded.

My Colonel would often tell us how the majority of the world leaders had no idea that it was him and his colleagues at the Soviet military intelligence who prevented the United States, Cuba and the USSR from getting embroiled in a heated war. I never approved entirely on how the Camp and its *Allianz* leaders wielded so much influence over a global network of spies, entrepreneurs, physicists, and politicians, but I have seen how desperately many senior intelligence officers of the Soviet Union cooperated with other agencies in order to prevent another war from breaking out. Many of the veterans of the Great Patriotic War were still serving in the leadership, and they had witnessed the sheer horror of the dreadful warfare that took place, and no one wanted war to break out between powerful nations.

However, it was alarming to hear that the Camp's commanders were ungently struggling to prevent a skirmish from taking place in the Iraqi-Saudi border. There was word that a war ship laden with nuclear weapons was heading to the southern Iraqi border cities, that were known to have high yielding oil rigs.

On an early morning, I received an urgent message on my pager, and the caller was a former employee of Richard. He said Richard was likely planning a disastrous operation that could destabilize the Middle East and damage America's relationship with the Gulf nations. The report sounded too dramatic to be true. How could one man start a war and destroy America's reputation? But then, I remembered, it was not an ordinary man we were talking about. It was Richard. It was the director of NSA's most notorious black ops unit. Prior to moving to America, Richard had been a senior member of the East German secret police, and even though he was born and raised in the Austrian capital of Vienna, most of his working days were spent in East Berlin. The United States government welcomed him to the country and offered him diplomatic immunity in exchange for information on the inner workings of the Eastern Bloc. He ultimately gained the trust of the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and eventually began working in the NSA. When I arrived in America as a young teenager, Richard was one of the first people to welcome me and offer me a job in his black ops group at the NSA.

But within a year of working for him, I suspected he was not entirely forthright, and often ordered his employees to carry out illegal and unsanctioned operations. This time, I was not too surprised to hear that Richard had once again used his sources at the CIA and NSA in an attempt to identify ways to launch a land invasion of Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

I independently investigated the case further and came across a handful of images that were taken by NORAD's photoreconnaissance satellites that showed Richard meeting with senior members of the Ba'ath Party and other administrative and security agencies related to the Iraqi leader. I wanted to know what was really going on in the Middle East, and why Richard was conducting suspicious rendezvous with war hawks. I reached out to several contacts and begged them for information or insight into the event. A war analyst in the Pentagon, who was well-acquainted with me took me to the Hoover Institution's Library & Archives

department, and showed me the archival collections pertaining to war, revolution, and peace. One of the sectors in the archives was the Ba'ath Party Archives, with had more than 10 million digitized page images and 1,500 video files collected from Iraq's Ba'ath headquarters and other clandestine sources. The documents were long and confusing. There were no written record of any contract between Richard and the Iraqi leadership. I knew I had to look elsewhere in order to solve the enigma. The only suspicious activity along the Iraqi border were an abrupt stockpile of weapons that were being transported from an unknown location. Why was Iraq receiving fortifications? Was an impending war on the horizon?

I asked a friend who was in charge of the photoreconnaissance satellites to provide me with real time images, so I could understand what the weapons buildup actually signified.

The sun was going down and the shadows turned darker, as the hours passed, and I was constantly worrying about what new disaster the world would be waking to. It frightened me greatly to think that some powerful teams of mercenaries were using American warships to launch surprise attack on Baghdad, Basra and Kuwait City.

I spoke to Bobby Lawrence, a friend who used to be my combat partner in the NSA. Bobby was also in the black ops unit in which I worked under the supervision of Richard, but he left after two years, to become an officer in the U.S. Navy. When I called Bobby to ask for confirmation if an American warship was in fact heading towards the oil-rich Gulf nations, he checked with several Naval commanders and got back to me.

"You won't believe what I just found out," Bobby said, the moment I picked up the phone. Without any preamble, my friend told me how the Navy was extremely worried about one of their ships going off course.

"Which ship has gone off course, Bobby?" I asked urgently.

"A timed satellite image showed that the ship was being marked, and targeted by another trajectory, like a powerful boat. It was following the US destroyer that was formerly sailing along the Indian Ocean." He informed me.

"Which warship is it?" I asked, eager to find out which American ship had been compromised.

"*USS Roosevelt*. It is a stealth amphibious assault ship. The US Navy had an inbuilt computer-guided missile system installed in it along with electromagnetic rail guns. The warship has tactical long-range missile system, meaning it could fire up to a distance of eighty-five miles." The Navy officer's voice dropped, and he sounded disconsolate. "If they are targeting that destroyer, they are probably looking to start a world war."

I questioned my friend probingly. "Listen, Bobby, do you think you can take control of the reconnaissance satellites? You designed similar grade malware during your Harvard days."

"Hacking into the satellite won't be easy, but I can try to look for ways to contact whoever is in command of the warship."

"We need to find out who authorized that ship to go off course," I urged my friend. "Whichever party or group is using the American warship is planning to start a massive war, and to the rest of the world, it will look as if the United States Navy had launched the attack."

"What do you suggest?" He said.

"We should contact the supreme commander of Allied forces in the Southwest Mediterranean. He would have the authority to shut down communication to missile-installed warships. That way, the person who is giving orders to the ship to strike at random Middle Eastern countries won't be able to communicate with him anymore."

"Leave that to me," Bobby decided. "And I'll be expecting you to be airborne within the hour. Someone has to physically go near to the warship and find out what the hell is going on."

Aboard the cargo aircraft which we planned to use as our base of operation, I saw that Bobby was waiting for me. He had already completed setting up his computer servers and was decrypting another layer of algorithm.

He beckoned me over. "I am getting lots of chatter from the Iraqi Air Force Strategic Forces Command. Apparently, they sensed a red flag."

"What made them so worried?"

"I will bet it is the approaching warship. They must have noticed the massive *USS Roosevelt* crawling to their harbor. About six hours ago, they just issued a *standing order* to launch an immediate counterattack in case of an air raid. Targets are unspecified."

"That is impossible!" I exclaimed. "I worked briefly at the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency. It is an acquisition agency that works on ballistic missile defense systems for the United States and its allies and one of the things I learned is that there is no way on earth that Iraq has any launching systems in place. They don't have those long range missiles of the firepower to block a ship the size of *USS Roosevelt*."

"Then what are you suggesting?" Bobby challenged me. "You think someone else issued the standing order to launch?"

I didn't reply right away and studied the reading from the satellite graphs that was displayed on Bobby's multi-screen computer. "If my satellites readings are correct, I just caught a multi-wave caliber-four flare above the hill station at Kahan Valley." I told my friend.

"That must be Ty," Bobby acknowledged. "He is inland. As long as we don't make radio contact with him, the blackmailing company won't be able to track his location."

"We have got to stop the missiles from being launched. How fast can you infiltrate the Iraqi missile control?"

"If someone could get close enough to their central launching center, he would have to insert my software into the mainframe of the data cache inside Iraqi defense force's command center, I will be able to halt the launching of any missile."

"So, Ty knows where to go?"

"Yes, he memorized the map. IAF stores their disposable arsenal and tritium-boosted weapons in bunkers under the Basra airbase. He has to make his way inside the launch room, which should be three and a half kilometer east of the main gate. A ramp will allow him to climb the tower which leads directly to the mobile missile command center. Once in there, I will be able to override their missile launch."

"How do you expect to do that?" I asked, pondering out loud.

"If I can intercept the missile in mid-phase, after they launch, I might be able to redirect the trajectory. But it will be out of our radar after ninety seconds. That is why I just got in touch with the Radar Intercept Officer. He said secure vessels like these use the international system of signals to communicate vital messages about crisis or navigation," Bobby explained.

"Did you tell him what is going on?" I inquired.

Bobby responded. "Negative. I only informed him that the missile defense system is offline. Asked him to check the on-board defense system. To see if it is activated."

"What did he say?"

"He replied in affirmative," Bobby read back his transmission. "The guy is saying this war fleet is equipped with midcourse anti-ballistic missile system that can intercept incoming warheads during the initial phase of ballistic trajectory flight."

"Listen, Bobby," I spoke up again. "Tell the Radar officer that his boat has most likely been compromised. Warn him that there may be multiple moles aboard the war ship. Since it is impossible to manually disarm the missile system, the people who hacked into all those satellites either paid or threatened someone to do it for them. It is imperative that he does not share his findings with anyone on the ship."

Bobby nodded; his face perplexed. "I wonder how they managed to manipulate the screen readings? Our security scans are showing the warship's anti-missile system has been disabled."

"All right, he has to check manually. What is a RIO trained for, generally?" I asked for no reason in particular.

"Monitoring weapons assignments, finding anomalies with the radar, maintaining radio communication and handling navigation equipment."

"Tell your source to go to the ship's engine room and manually re-activate the safety mechanisms," I ordered my friend. "Make sure he knows what is at stake. The ship may be targeted any moment."

I wasted no time to book a flight to the nearest Naval Base in the Middle East. I knew a handful of men who had previously worked at the Defense Department and were liaising with the NSA. They promised to look into the fiasco that was about to take place.

Once I safely left the perimeter of Mediterranean Operating Base, I switched on my scrambler phone and activated it by entering a thirteen-digit serial number. After the first ring, I was warmly greeted by the familiar voice of Bobby.

Bobby spoke first. "I am relieved, really. I was afraid you would get stuck inside that base. It had too many layers of security." "Oh, you didn't have to worry about me," I responded buoyantly. "Where are you now? Your sentences are cutting off."

"That is because I am aboard a Boeing business jet. I felt it would be safer to hack into those dangerous territories from several thousand feet altitude. Less likely someone could trace the hack back to me if we are moving at a thousand kilometers per hour."

I wasted no time in sharing my progress. "I uploaded your software into the control panel of the military base. Were you able to get into the system? How's the progress going?"

"Well, there is good news and bad news," Bobby hesitantly replied.

"What's the good news?" I asked, only faint optimism lingering in my words.

"Because of the software uplink, we now have control over the launch of missiles from the Mediterranean base."

"Great. Then what's the bad news?"

"Every other military installation in Iraq is under their control."

"Their, meaning *their*. Not the *Iraqi* government."

"Nope, I mean the blackmailers who are trying to poach *USS Roosevelt* and sandwich it between Iran and Iraq, most likely trying to start a global war."

"One other thing, Bobby," I began. "I need you to run an identity for me. A Doug Feinstein. According to one of the guys I questioned at the base, he is a member of the Agency and apparently ordered those senior Iraqi officers to breach their own security, to conduct some bogus surveillance air sweep."

"Running the name through the global database now." Bobby replied almost instantly. "It is an alias, belonging to a former CIA officer. According to declassified documents from the National Security Council archives, the State Department declared him a *disavowed affiliate* six years ago due to complaints from his superiors. Feinstein was accused of compromising State security by supplying faulty intelligence to third parties. If he is the guy the Iraqi army officers were talking about, he is probably pulling off another of his stunts."

"Or the sailing blackmailers may have hired him to play this prank on Iraq." I suggested. "Tell me, what are we going to do about the rest of the missile control sites?"

"I don't have any solid plans right now, but something just popped on my screen. It seems that this Feinstein exchanged numerous emails with a black ops director in the NSA. Do you want to guess who it was?"

"I don't want to make any wild guesses. Tell me." I replied.

"Richard. The Austrian dude you work for."

I felt indignant. "Richard is not my employer any longer. We had a fall out, and I don't work for him anymore. His activities seemed suspicious to me, so I stopped doing unauthorized mission on his behest."

"Well, it seems your Richard came up with another masquerade plan. I am looking at some serious digital trail leading up to Richard's endgame here. He is definitely behind the hijacking, or if you want to call sidetracking, of *USS Roosevelt*. The ship's commander has been compromised."

"Look, I know a little about how the US military works. A Navy commander will never undertake an operation against a sovereign nation unless he believed his orders came directly from the President."

"You are right," Bobby told me. "But there is a possibility that the naval Commander is under the impression he is acting under the orders of the POTUS. After all, if Richard is behind this, it makes sense. He is one of the most senior officers of the NSA. He probably used his contacts at Pentagon to relay this order."

I tried to remain calm, but the implication of this attack was becoming more and more apparent. I did not want to think what the repercussion of this invasion would look like, if the world saw a giant American warship invading and bombarding the sovereign state of Iraq. No one would believe that the United States government had no idea this was about to take place. It would have been hard for any rational person to believe that a powerful NSA black ops director single handedly manipulated a Navy admiral to steer his ship towards the gulf region and launch missiles at a non-hostile state. By the time Pentagon and the U.S. Defense Department would come to learn of the attack, it will be too late to prevent a catastrophe.

From the aerial view, there was no doubt in my mind that some party was aiming to direct an amphibious assault on the coastline of Iraq, and possibly Kuwait. And *USS Roosevelt* was the Navy destroyer that was sailing in the Persian Gulf, and was going to launch the first missiles into the oil rich gulf nation.

I watched in desperate apprehension as the GPS satellite showed the warship getting nearer to the coast. When the American ship was fifty miles from the shore of Basra, I noticed a flurry of movement on the north end of Iraq. Hundreds of small stealth aircraft were being directed to Basra from the Iraqi capital.

Visibility was poor, and I didn't know which sector those planes belonged to. I contacted the one person who I trusted: a close contact who had been my mentor in the Camp. We both had trained together under the former KGB colonel after leaving the orphanage in Siberia. My dear friend Alyosha had saved my life countless times when we were conducting clandestine mission in the remote corners of the Eastern Bloc, or even in the wild countryside of South America. I trusted him with my deepest fears and thoughts, and I knew he would be able to advise me on the right course of action.

Since I had no way of getting in touch with the commander of the *USS Roosevelt*, the captain of the American warship would never know that he was being used as a pawn in a war that was not sanctioned by the White House.

I needed to know who was behind the terrible fiasco that was about to take place, so I dialed a number from memory.

"Da," a clipped voice replied after the third ring.

My heart warmed. I recognized the voice at once. It was my dear friend Alyosha. Although we hadn't spoken since I came to America, his comforting tone calmed my nervousness, and without wasting any time, I quickly apprised him of the delicate situation that

was unfolding in the Persian Gulf. I explained that a US Naval vessel had ran aground and was being used by some rogue senior US official to launch an illegal invasion into Iraq, and possibly Iran.

“Yes,” my friend replied after a brief pause. “Several members of the Politburo approved a defensive maneuver earlier this week. They were under the impression that the United States was trying to attack Iraq unprovoked. Baghdad sought assistance from the And USSR leadership disapproves of unnecessary wars, as you know.”

I was doubly confused by the statement. “What do you mean the USSR is planning to take defensive measures against the American war ship?”

“Soviet fighter boats will give warnings, and if they are not heeded, then decision has been made to fire warning shots, and even live ammunition rounds. Our government does not want the USA to attack Iraq for no reason.”

“I know, I know. Alyosha, no one wants this war. The White House, the Pentagon, the State Department, none of the leading American agency have any idea why this Navy destroyer is heading to the Iraqi coast. It has gone radio silent, and we have reasons to believe that the ship has been hijacked by mercenaries. But tell me this, who made the decision to fire live rounds at the USS Roosevelt?”

“Only as a last resort,” Alyosha assured me. “It was a unanimous decision taken by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.”

“Very well,” I took a deep breath and tried to think logically. “I have one more question. Do you happen to know why Pentagon’s geospatial satellites have captured images of thermal movement alongside Russia’s border?”

“If you mean the weapons shipment, then it was due to the impending US strike on Iraq.”

“The weapons shipment?” I repeated, confused.

Alyosha explained easily. “Sixty truckloads of weapons from the missile storage garrisons in Vladikavkaz, headed to Erbil.”

“By road?” I asked, making a mental note of where the city was. “That is a long way.”

“Yes, but only partially. The weapons were air lifted from a military base in Tbilisi. But this is the thing- our nation is eager to help Iraq, because we don’t want to have another war in the world. Hasn’t America done enough?” My friend sighed and then spoke again. “First, it is Korea, and then Vietnam, and now Iraq.”

“I am not surprised that the Politburo wants to maintain peace. They are naturally eager to maintain stability in the region. And speaking of logistics- how far is Vladikavkaz from Iraq?”

Alyosha answered peacefully. “Vladikavkaz is the capital city of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. It is on the Russian border area. A long way from Baghdad, but this was the fastest way to get reinforcement to the Iraqi leader. One of the Soviet television broadcasters operated via the *Orbita* claimed that Iraq was seeking to remain peaceful and neutral and would not create any skirmishes in the Gulf region. But no one can be sure what is really going on in the American minds.”

“Thank you for sharing so much details with me,” I said sincerely. “You are a good friend, and I will do my best to get in touch with my contacts at the State Department and let them know that they must halt the US naval vessel as soon as possible.”

There was a long pause, before Alyosha spoke. “You would be interested to hear this, comrade.” He said excitedly. “I received a wireless report just now from Fleet Admiral Gorchov. There has been a significant development. Three hours ago, the American warship that was traversing the Persian Gulf had been intercepted by *Ilyanov*, a Soviet nuclear-powered super carrier. They detained the *USS Roosevelt*, preventing an attack on Iraq, and successfully notified the White House that their ship had been sailing in the wrong waters. The commander of the American Navy ship also claimed that he had received direct orders from a senior source in the NSA, who used authentication codes belonging to the President and ordered him to strike directly near all the oil fields in Iraq and Kuwait.”

“But there was no exchange of fire?” I asked nervously.

“No, my friend,” Alyosha said happily. “Everything seemed to have been resolved peacefully. There was a severe misunderstanding, and the military commanders confirmed that they were never authorized to launch any strike against any nation. It was a false order, and they are conducting an investigation as to who was responsible for the sabotage of an American warship.”

The United States Senate Intelligence Committee launched a closed-door hearing on the men responsible for the fiasco. After a six-month trial and investigation, they concluded that the director of the NSA’s black ops division was solely responsible for manipulating several naval commanders into diverting their vessel and all its crews into the Persian Gulf. The Secretary of Defense personally removed Richard from his position at the NSA after discovering irrefutable evidence that he personally gave the order to launch missiles into Iraq, without prior approval from the White House or the Pentagon. Richard was scheduled to stand trial on sabotage and treason, but somehow managed to secure a pardon at the last minute. I don’t how he managed to avoid serving jail time, but Richard was highly influential in Washington and it was not shocking to see him get away with a slap on the wrist. A congressman I met with during a

military parade several days later told me that Richard promised to supply the U.S. government with classified intel about the secret nuclear programs of several belligerent nation, and due to his cooperation, the government decided to be lenient on him and acquitted him of all charges.

However, I was extremely worried about what Richard had done. He actually tried to use an American warship to invade Iraq, in order to take control of its oil fields. I knew that he owned several deep sea oil rigs in the Pacific, but I never expected him to engage in open wars to consume more petroleum. But knowing how desperate he was to earn free money and natural resources, I asked my dear friend Bobby to keep a close watch on the former NSA black ops director. I needed to be certain he wouldn't try to attack any other countries using his highly trained mercenaries.

Two months after the narrowly avoided war, the world seemed to have become peaceful again. But I received an urgent message from Bobby Lawrence, the NSA operative who had worked under Richard several years ago. He informed me that a disturbing incident took place in the Baltic sea. Several Iraqi and Chechen terrorists had apparently hijacked a Soviet nuclear submarine and attempted to ram the vessel into an aircraft carrier, but they failed when a timely accident on board caused all submariners to die due to the lack of oxygen. I wanted to know the details of the attack, but Bobby asked me to check out certain coordinates at once and ascertain whether the accident in the sea was an act of sabotage.

In a rare show of solidarity, the United States government conducted a joint investigation with the Committee for State Security and decided that neither nations were guilty of starting a war. Richard was reprimanded by the White House, who stripped him of his authority, after USSR provided ample evidence proving his wrongdoings.

This development was not taken happily, and Richard had on several occasion lashed out against the Russian government for spying on him, but Senators in Washington ignored his grievances, and warned him not to hijack U.S. war ships again.

By the time I managed to arrive in the State Department safe house in Tallinn, I discovered that the submarined had already been salvaged. It was running course from the Baltic sea and was found near the Gulf of Finland. Initial reports from the Soviet maritime authorities suggested that the vessel was hijacked, but the identities of the hijackers were unknown. The bodies were kept in a naval base on Kotlin Island, just west of St. Petersburg. I called my old friend who was a KGB special operative and worked at Lubyanka Square and told him I may be able to use United States data base to identify the men who were in the nuclear-powered submarine. He granted me access pass to the naval base in order to verify the identity of the alleged hijackers whose bodies were found in the Soviet nuclear submarine.

By this time, technology had advanced significantly. My American friend, Bobby, had given me several equipment to identify the deceased men, by scanning their facial features, and saving a copy of their retinal pattern in a universal organizer, that was programmed to cross-reference identities of over one billion people worldwide. I hoped those gadgets would help both the Soviet and American government to positively identify who were behind the terrible hijacking.

My trip to Kotlin Island was brief. I was able to successfully capture the images of the twenty men whose bodies were found inside the Soviet submarine. It was ironic that all the personnel, who were the alleged hijackers, were dead, and they were dressed in military camouflage. Upon my return to a United States Army installation in Kuwait, I was greeted by the chief of personnel in the Camp Arifan. He was the highest-ranking officer in the US Marine Corps and promised to help me identify the deceased men whose pictures I managed to bring back from Kotlin Island. For the next eight hours, I was kept in a pre-fabricated concrete building and debriefed thoroughly.

Two military intelligence experts studied the photographs and attempted to identify the men who were found in the nuclear-powered submarine.

"This is obvious," the Signal Intelligence Analyst declared resolutely.

"What is so obvious?" I asked.

"If you look carefully, you will notice these men were all dead, when they were transported into the submarine."

"How can you tell from the photographs?" I questioned.

The Imagery Analyst of the Marine Corps showed me the creases of the uniform the dead men were wearing. "These uniforms were place on their body post-mortem. And the body build is not military. Meaning, those Iraqi men were civilians."

Timothy, a Geospatial Analyst who was listening intently finally spoke. "Yes, you two are right. This dude here is definitely a civilian. From the callous patches on his hand, I would say he is a farmer."

"How do you all these details?" I asked, still confused by their announcement.

It was strange that the Soviet government had concluded that the men who hijacked their nuclear-powered submarine had been Iraqi soldiers, but the American intelligence agents discovered that the Iraqi men who were on that boat were actually civilians.

“They didn’t tell you?” Timothy said. The Geospatial Analyst cleared his throat and explained. “I have been the U.S. military liaison to Iraq for the last three years, and I can tell for certain, that the five men whose images we are looking at are civilians. And just so we can all be clear on this, I already sent the images to my counterpart at the US embassy in Baghdad. He ran the images through a national facial database and he confirmed that the men who are accused of being hijackers were kidnapped from their home in Erbil and presumably murdered and dressed as soldiers.”

The Imagery Analyst of the Marine Corps shook his head in confusion. “But the real question should be- why the hell would someone go through so much trouble of kidnapping random Iraqi villagers, and then hijack a Soviet nuclear-powered submarine, and kill all personnel and dump the Iraqi bodies inside the submarine?”

“Well, whoever did this wanted the Russians to think that Iraq is a belligerent nation.” Timothy sighed. “Look, I don’t like this. It smells dirty. This is a classic frame job. Even if we manage to tell the Soviets that the men in the submarine were kidnapped against their own will, I don’t think they will believe us.”

“If the criminals who kidnapped those Iraqi civilians wanted USSR to hate Iraq and stop helping them, then their plan worked perfectly,” the Signal Intelligence Analyst informed us. “Russia is publicly withdrawing support from Iraq, as we speak.”

“Too bad for them- Iraqis,” Timothy said unsympathetically. “I never liked the Iraqi dictator too much anyway. I am sure glad Russia is not backing them anymore. We can attack them in peace, if necessary, I mean.”

I couldn’t help but interrupt. “Look, guys, I understand Iraq has been framed, but that means they are also a victim of some huge criminal conspiracy. Why should the United States or anyone want to attack Iraq? Wars are so unnecessary.”

“Hey, we are Marines,” Timothy laughed. “War is what we do. It’s our job. And thanks for bringing us the intel. Now, at least we know that the Iraqi army was not responsible for hijacking the Soviet submarine.”

The three men hastily bade me farewell, and escorted me from the military base.

Before I boarded my flight in Kuwait, I phoned a friend who lived in Basra. He was a former Cryptologic Language Analyst who worked alongside me in the NSA black ops division.

After I told him about what I discovered and that the Soviet submarine that had been hijacked was actually taken by a mercenary criminal group, and that the Iraqis were not responsible for the alleged attack, he promised to look into the issue and find out what happened to the civilians who were kidnapped. I begged him to meet the family members of the deceased Iraqi men and ask them if there were any eyewitnesses to the kidnapping.

Five hours later, my Iraqi contact returned the call. In a sober voice, the Cryptologic Language Analyst told me how he was able to troubleshoot ground data terminals and found out that several local Iraqi police officers were shot dead by fifty masked gunmen, who then broke into a village and kidnapped twenty young Iraqi men and bundled them into metal trucks and rode away. Twelve hours later, the bodies of those kidnapped Iraqi youths were found inside a Soviet submarine, and an anonymous phone call to Lubyanka Building informed them that Iraq was planning to become very hostile to USSR, even though at that time, the two nations had been allies.

I asked my friend to send me the recording of the phone call that went to Moscow. He obliged, and I was able to listen to the phone call that provided the convenient tip to the KGB. Of course, the voice in the phone call was disguised, and I was not surprised. But I had already created an app that was successfully able to decipher the original voice from the garbled sound that was used to disguise the person’s identity.

Before I had even heard the entire voice recording, I recognized the familiar tone. It was Richard!

The knowledge of this piece of information numbed me. I did not understand at first why Cynthia’s step-father, my former employer, would be on a direct phone line to Kremlin and give them a false tip about an impending hijacking.

There was only one explanation. Richard knew something no one else at the State Department had any idea about.

I immediately tapped into the hearing device I had placed in Richard’s home phone. He had made thirteen calls to Brussels, Vienna and Ontario in the morning of the hijacking. And after studying Richard’s financial transactions, I noticed that on the morning of the hijacking, he had personally wired ten million dollars to a shell company in Tallinn, with the instructions to seize and hijack a Soviet submarine.

However, Richard’s involvement was unknown to either the American or the Russian government. He was careful to make sure someone else, such as the kidnapped Iraqi and Chechen civilians, took the blame for the terrible catastrophe.

I was shocked at the way he had manipulated me, and the American intelligence agencies for so many years, but I hoped the truth would come out one day.

Does Cynthia know about this? She probably has no idea what her stepfather had been doing? Was she being too naïve to believe everything Richard told her? With sadness, I realized that I had been foolish for too long.

Endless questions with empty answers ran through my head as I glanced up at the ceiling above the desk, trying to rest my agitated mind, in the hope that a brief sleep would give time for my emotions to diminish in distress and allow me to have a clear thought in the morning.

Then the war happened.

December 1989.

Ever since I started to have a romantic relationship with Cynthia, Richard had tried to force us apart. Twice, unidentified assailants burned down my house, so I ended up living in a boat. Cynthia would come to the boat to visit me every night, but Richard found out about it, and he sent a criminal to blow up the boat with a bomb.

I then moved to Houston, and lived in the basement of an old man's home. The Texan man was very generous to me, and he seemed to be the nicest American I had ever met. I opened a small car repair garage and used to work in there, but one day, several men came in the shop, and beat up all the employees, and killed the nice Texan old man. They also set the entire car showroom and garage on fire. When I tried to stop them, those criminals stabbed me with long knives. I don't know how I survived those wounds, but a hospital took me to the emergency room, and the nurses were able to stitch up my wound. I barely survived, but the attacks on my life continued. I would always be followed by gangs of criminals who tried to kill me, so I lived my days, hiding in the shadows.

In the year 1989, Cynthia and I went to a vacation in Mexico, and we had a wonderful time together in cozy hotel rooms. Cynthia said she loved me a lot, so I finally proposed to her for marriage. Cynthia told me she would think about it, and left the hotel. As soon as she left the hotel room, eleven men barged into the room, carrying bamboo sticks. They smashed the head of my dog and beat me hundreds of times, and finally thought I was dead. So, they dumped my body in a graveyard and left. But I was lucky, because the next day, a Spanish man picked me up from the cemetery and took care of me in his house. He took me to a local village doctor who told me that I had multiple broken bones. For three months, I could not walk, but I was very grateful to the Mexican villagers for looking after me and helping me heal. As soon as I was able to walk, I began to look for Cynthia, and called all her friends to find out where she was. When I finally met her at a tennis field, I noticed that she was staying with Richard. One of the bodyguards who was with her was an employee of Richard's secret NSA program. That was when I realized that Richard was responsible for the attack on my hotel. I told Cynthia we should leave Richard at once. She agreed, and we both ran away to California. Cynthia took a job as a waitress, and after living in California for several months, I proposed to Cynthia again. The next day, one of the worst attacks happened. I was sitting in the room with two of my Russian friends when masked criminals entered. This time, I was attacked again by a group of twenty men. They burst into my house, killed my Russian friend, and beat me with metal rods. Later, those men dragged me to the kitchen, and placed my face over the stove and burned my face, until I could feel the flesh melting in the fire. My eyes, and cheeks were flayed. Police arrived and took me to the hospital. The doctors bandaged my whole face and told me to stay in the hospital for one week, but I was afraid that Richard's agents would come back and try to kill me again, so I climbed out the hospital window and escaped. I could not go back to my house so I slept on the streets, using cardboard boxes and newspapers as blankets. My wounds were raw and it was getting infected, but I did not care. I only wanted to see Cynthia one more time, so I shuffled through the streets, and hid in front of Cynthia's apartment. That evening, Cynthia returned from work, and I could see her beautiful face from the other side of the street. I wanted to talk to her so I ran to her, and followed her to her door. She screamed when she saw me, because my face was totally burnt and unrecognizable. I tried to call her name, and talk to her, but my voice was hoarse due to being burned. Cynthia was scared of me, thinking I was a strange homeless man who looked like a monster.

I tried to talk to Cynthia again the next day, but suddenly, several cars began to chase me. They fired bullets at me, and I tried to run away, but two helicopters were chasing me as well. I was able to escape those killers, but then I saw something dreadful. Those men who were following me grabbed Cynthia from the streets and kidnapped her in a car. I immediately ran after the car to save her, and I kept running until I was trapped between two buildings.

I tried to hide, but the kidnappers announced that they would kill Cynthia if I didn't show myself. They were holding her under a chain, and when I came out of the hiding place, they ripped the bandage off my face and kicked me to the ground. Then they told Cynthia to look at my scarred face, and laughed a lot. They asked her if she still loved an ugly man like me. They mocked me and said I looked like a deformed dog, with my eyes and cheeks burned. Other criminals laughed loudly and said they could insult and torture me all they wanted because they knew I never killed anyone. While they were trying to convince Cynthia how monstrous I looked, I began to fight with them, but they threw me off a window. I was able to hang onto a window pane with my damaged hands and barely survived. I heard Cynthia crying for me, and later, she found me on the street, lying on the dirty floor. Cynthia then told me that she still loved me. When I heard her sweet voice, I cried uncontrollably. Sometimes, people ask me why I loved Cynthia so much. It was because

she was supporting me when I lost everyone else in the world. I love her because she loved me when no one else did. I love her because she talked to me when no one else did. I love her because she is all I had and I had no one else.

What later became known as the mighty Gulf War took place six months after the submarine sabotage incident. The first day was deluged with massive naval and aerial bombardment.

I watched in helplessness as U.S. led alliance bombarded the Iraqi state, dropping thousands of deadly bombs over civilian populations, and I hoped desperately that Moscow would intervene and try to stop this war, but that was not to be, because the Soviet Union was deceived terribly into believing that Iraqi backed hijackers had attempted to take control of their nuclear-powered submarine. The United States and its allies also knew that Moscow had long been a close ally of Baghdad. It had a treaty of friendship and co-operation with Saddam Hussein's regime, and for two decades it had trained the Iraqi military, supplying it with billions of dollars' worth of weaponry and equipment. But the situation was rapidly changing, because Richard had successfully managed to frame Iraqis for a crime his own mercenaries did. He carried out this carefully planning framing because he wanted Moscow to stop helping and protecting Iraq, so that he would be able to use American forces and the NATO invasion to seize Iraq's and Kuwait's natural oil reserves. Although Moscow refused to physically intervene in the Gulf War, they still did not want bloodshed to take place. During the heated battle, the Soviet leader was desperately trying to implement a six-point peace plan, sending envoys from Moscow to the Gulf region, trying to implement it.

It was almost one year after the war ended was I able to contact my childhood friend who was a regional director in the KGB, and I was able to share my intel with him and showed him proof that the men who had hijacked the Soviet nuclear-powered submarine were not Iraqi soldiers, but were ordinary villagers who were kidnapped from Basra and Erbil. I told my friend how it was Richard who had orchestrated the whole sabotage in order to force Moscow to stop supporting Iraq. Richard was still angry that the first time he used American warship USS Roosevelt to attack Iraq failed because Moscow vigorously intervened and halted the invasion. It was a colossal loss for Richard, who had hoped to profit from the unsanctioned war and take control of Iraq's and Kuwait's oil fields.

It seemed that the truth did not matter anymore.

It was too late anyway.

The Gulf War was over, and thousands of people had died, and I could not do anything to stop it. It was a terrible time of my life. I was a witness to a carnage taking place.

Two days before the American ships neared the Persian Gulf, over one million pounds of explosives had been dropped on the peninsula. It seemed impossible that anyone could have survived the bombardment. As the sun beat down on the desert island, the battle of the peninsula had only just begun.

I watched aerial footages the next day. The Iraqi landscape had been pockmarked by bombs and incinerated by explosives. In the searing desert heat, the area had become a mass graveyard, with thousands of wounded, shell-shocked, injured victims grieving over their dead.

The next few months-

From mid-1990 to the next year, the world faced the consequences of a brutal war that ravaged the Iraqi nation. Moscow tried to call for peace, and attempted to host talks between the warring parties, but the fighting raged on. The Gulf War was almost a modern-day world war because although it was commanded by the United States, more than thirty nations joined in as the coalition force against Iraq. They wanted to stop Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait and ultimately control the rising oil pricing which had skewed global consumption and production.

By this time, I had come across solid evidence that proved that Richard had manipulated this entire warfare, and had previously tried to hijack an American warship, the *USS Roosevelt* destroyer, and used his mercenary teams to launch an unprovoked attack on Iraq, making it appear as though the United States government was behind this. Fortunately, Moscow was able to halt the *USS Roosevelt* from docking at Iraq's harbor, but they couldn't prevent the war in the Gulf region. This was due to the influence Richard had on many senior officials in the Senate and House of Representative. One of the men Richard met with repeatedly was Frank Ashcrof, the Assistant Secretary of State for International Affairs, who supported Richard's idea of invading Iraq. Ashcrof was a major shareholder in Richard's private oil company and both men were likely to profit from the outcome of this war.

But I didn't want to depend on circumstantial evidence alone, so I immediately flew to Richard's office in Washington D.C. and asked him to explain the voice recording. It was a clear audio of him calling the Kremlin's legislative switchboard and telling them how

a Soviet submarine was hijacked near the Gulf of Finland. This was shortly after Moscow successfully thwarted Richard's attempt to use the American warship as a decoy to attack the sovereign nation of Iraq.

I accused Richard of playing with people's lives but he rebutted my argument, and protested that he only made that call to Moscow to give them information about the hijacked submarine because his close friend, had asked him to do it.

"Who is this friend you are talking about?"

Richard ran a hand over his thinning hair and replied heavily. "Dear boy, you do not know him personally, but he is a very charismatic leader, one who would stop at nothing to get what he wants."

"Who is it?"

"W. H. Buccaneer. The Under Secretary for Political Affairs," Richard answered simply. "We worked together in the Department of State."

"You expect me to believe that Buccaneer was responsible for hijacking the American warship and almost attacking Iraq without authorization?" I shook my head in exasperation.

"I don't expect you to believe it, son, but it is the truth."

"It was your voice on the tape," I insisted.

"Yes, it was," Richard admitted easily. "And I made that phone call to Kremlin because Buccaneer asked me to do it. He had been using me the entire time."

"I don't believe that. The mercenaries who were hired to hijack the Soviet nuclear submarine were actually your employees. I saw the money trail go directly from your off-shore bank account."

"Ah, but you should know, Buccaneer and I shared some of those account a long time ago. He was probably using my login credentials."

"If you are right, then I want to talk to your friend Buccaneer."

Richard nodded heavily. "We will go to meet him at once, because I will also make him pay for what he did to me." He spoke with sudden emotion and zeal, and I almost believed in the possibility that Richard was being framed for the crimes. "W. H. Buccaneer takes his lunch break across the Constitution Gardens. We will find him there."

Before we exited Richard's apartment, I saw him reach below his table and recover a small gun that was attached to the bottom of the wooden desk. He slid a silencer over the barrel and slipped the weapon inside his suit jacket.

I didn't ask him the reason for carrying a weapon but it appeared unusual for an old man to arm himself with lethal round, especially since we were in one of the most secure cities in the world.

As we walked across the National Mall road, Richard told me how he undertook numerous trips to the Gulf region in order to restore peace and prevent the war. I didn't know whether to trust what he said or not, but I knew if I was able to speak with Buccaneer, many of my unanswered questions would be finally solved.

W.H. Buccaneer was a thin tall man. He was seated gracefully at the park bench on the grassy lawn and enthusiastically got to his feet when he saw Richard. The two men exchanged warm greeting, and were speaking in low tones. I approached nearer and introduced myself. Buccaneer looked confused at my presence and shot a bewildering glance at Richard.

"It's alright," Richard told his friend. "This kid works for me. He was accompanying on this walk, and we happened to spot you here."

I was startled to hear the lie, and quickly interrupted Richard. "Mr. Buccaneer," I said as respectfully as I could. "I recently came across some evidence that showed that Richard used his money to fund Eastern European terrorists who had tried to hijack the Soviet nuclear submarine early last year- right after the fiasco with the *USS Roosevelt*."

"Those are classified information, son," Buccaneer interrupted me. "Where does your source get this intel from?"

I ignored his question and asked him if it was true that he used money from Richard's account to hire mercenaries to hijack the submarine.

Buccaneer looked shocked to hear the question, and before he could respond, Richard pulled the weapon from beneath his jacket's lapel and shot the old man directly in the forehead. I could hear the impact of the bullet smashing the diplomat's skull, but before I could even react, the man was dead. The cold sandwich he was eating for lunch slipped from his hands and fell on the grassy ground.

I looked helplessly at Richard. I knew he was Cynthia's step-father, but I could not keep my voice respectfully calm. "What the hell did you do that for?" I shouted.

Richard calmly replaced his gun in his inner jacket pocket and answered calmly. "Men like Buccaneer make me sick. They are lying, sniveling bastards, who spend their whole life framing others for their crimes."

“But that is exactly why I came here with you!” I said furiously. “I wanted to ask him the questions myself, and find out if he really framed you. Why did you shoot him in the public?”

“If you think for one second, that Buccaneer would have told you the truth about any of this, then you are more naïve than I thought. I put his lying and miserable life to an end. You should be thanking me for killing a traitor like that.”

“But you cannot carry out extra judicial killing,” I protested. “You executed the Under Secretary for Political Affairs inside Washington D.C. and right in front of the Lincoln Memorial. It was wrong.”

“Let me tell you what is exactly wrong, young man. You don’t understand what these corrupt bureaucrats of Washington are capable of. Under Secretary Buccaneer single handedly tried to attack Iraq, bypassing Soviet security patrol and then framed me for the entire episode. I had every moral reason to kill him.”

After hearing Richard speak so passionately about this, I decided not to argue with him.

On our journey back to Langley, Richard gave me a detailed account and explanation of happened during and prior to the Gulf War. I was almost convinced he was innocent. He showed me evidence of how W. H. Buccaneer tried to carry out all those sabotage operations and used his account to fund those operation, so that it would look as though Richard had carried out the hijacking of the Soviet nuclear-powered submarine. Richard’s excuses were making sense, so I didn’t argue further. After all, the only witness I had, the only man who could have verified or corroborated Richard’s statements was Buccaneer, and he was already dead.

Reluctantly, I apologized to Richard for blaming him and accusing him of being the mastermind of the terrorist attack on Iraq and the sabotage of the submarine, and to my surprise, he was genial to me, and readily forgave me for my previous outburst.

A year later, I became desperate to calm my conscience, and decided to pay another visit to my dear mother’s resting place. Too much had happened in my life, and I was eager to share my challenges and adventures with my mother- who I knew, was watching over me through all these years.

Visiting the burial place of my mother was both a painful and an emotional experience for me, because of the traumatizing event that had taken place several years earlier. It was shortly after I had arrived in America and was still reporting to my supervisor at the Camp, when I was granted untraceable travelling documents. I was elated and seized the opportunity to fly to London and see the auspicious ground beneath which my mother was buried two decades ago.

But everything did not go as planned.

What was supposed to be a sentimental visit turned into a violent brawl, because I had been followed. And my enemies saw that I regularly paid visit to a particular graveyard in London. This caused them to become suspicious, and once I returned to the States, a caretaker of the cemetery called to inform me that numerous unidentified workers were breaking the headstone on my mother’s grave. This news felt like a knife to my hear. I was told that the workers had a six-ton grave digging machine with them and were trying to exhume the grave! I was continents away, powerless to stop the horrible dishonorable criminals, but I phoned London police and begged them for help. My mother’s resting place was being desecrated and I needed it to stop. One of the police chiefs agreed, and they were able to send a patrol car to the scene and chase away the grave diggers. The intruders fled from the scene, but I knew the men who had come to dishonor this sacred grave would be back and would try again. So, the next morning, I flew to London, and began the most difficult task of my life. To keep my mother safe...

In some of the last entries of her diary, my mother wrote about her parents and her family members. It was all strange to me, because I had never met any one of them. I never saw my maternal uncles, aunts or grandparents. I didn’t even know if I had living cousins in the Soviet Union.

Two locations were mentioned most frequently in my mother’s diary: Moscow and Grozny.

From her journals, I learned that her father was from Grozny and some of her distant relatives lived near the village of Samashki, in the west of Chechnya. Her father had passed away a long time ago, and was buried in a family graveyard several kilometers from Grozny, and in one passage, my mother had written that it was her impossible wish that she would be resting in the afterlife, beside her father, grandmother and other family members.

When I re-read this diary entry, I knew what I had to do. London was too dangerous for my mother. She was not safe here.

I had to move her from this graveyard and allow her to rest somewhere more peaceful, and a place that will not be lonely. She would be happier if she spent eternity in the company of her deceased family members in Grozny. I proceeded with this task at once, and I personally oversaw the delicate task of exhuming her remains by licensed workers and transporting them to in an airtight coffin. The rented private jet I hired transported my mother’s coffin to her father’s native Grozny. I knew the location of her family’s graveyard in the area where numerous members of her family were laid to rest including my maternal grandfather. As I helped the workers carry the

bier to this new place, I hoped that somehow, she would find some comfort in knowing that her blood relatives were lying beside her. That she was not alone in this violent and unsacred world.

Since that day, I have been returning to this spot several times each year, and told my mother about all the work I have been doing.

It was early 1994 when I made this particular visit. As per the usual protocol, I switched planes three times, detoured the rented vehicle and arrived at the secret holy spot. I was so careful to make sure no one in the world would find out about my mother's new burial place.

Cynthia's stepfather was relentless in trying to start a civil war in Russia. This was why he ordered the Russian president Belstin to invade and bomb Chechnya. He hoped that with Russia and Chechnya at war, America and other NATO countries could invade them and successfully destroy the whole nation while native Russians were still fighting each other.

As soon as the new American president came to power in 1992, Richard became busy. He asked the for permission to attack the Twin Towers and frame the American Moslem for it, but the president became furious, and said he will never give false flag operation like this in his own country. In 1998, Richard asked him to use the fake terrorist attack to lock up all American Moslem inside concentration camps, but the president refused to listen to him. This time, Richard threatened the president that he will ruin his reputation forever. The American president told Richard that he is too famous and popular, and no one can destroy his reputation. However, that same year, at the end of 1998, the president got impeached by the Congress and Senate for having an affair with a young woman and his popularity went down. Richard successfully took revenge on the president for not agreeing to blow up the Twin Towers.

Despite the president's downfall, Richard continued to plan an attack on New York City, and he hired a Serbian army soldier to do that.

Richard gave a nuclear weapon to a Serbian man and told him to make a video in which he says that he is a Moslem, even though in reality, he was an Orthodox Serb. The Serb man was eager to blow up New York as a revenge for the NATO bombing of Sarajevo, but I was able to stop the nuclear weapon from going off. An American marine was helping me locate the bomb which was in hidden somewhere in New York, but before he could tell me where the bomb was, one of Richard's mercenaries kidnapped him and tortured the soldier. They sent me a message ordering me to give myself in. I surrendered myself to the criminals immediately in order to save my American friend. However, the soldier was still angry at me, and said I should have been kidnapped in his place, and I should have been tortured instead of him. I wept in sadness when I saw how much suffering the soldier had to endure, so I readily agreed that it should have been me instead of him in that torture cell.

A year later, another election took place in America, and this time, a new president came into power in 2000. In 2001, Richard approached the new president and told him to give permission to blow up the World Trade Center in New York and frame Arabs and other Moslem youths for it, and the new president agreed. Richard promised to make this president famous and he soon carried out one of the worst terrorist attacks in the history of the United States.

During the September 11 attacks in 2001, Richard framed Saudi Arabia and blew up three buildings around the World Trade Center. I had tried to stop him at that time, but he threatened to drop nuclear bombs over Russia if I interfered.

I had no choice but to let him do as he pleased. I remember that Cynthia's stepfather promised to make America like the Nazi Germany again, and he said he will make the government introduce the Patriot Law and eventually start a Holocaust of the Moslems in America and Canada.

The next year, he paid the fake Taliban terrorist group to claim responsibility for the September 11, 2001 attack, and used it as a pretext to make the U.S. military invade Afghanistan. Richard's ultimate goal was to invade Pakistan and destroy the entire subcontinent.

In 2012, Richard tried to create several other terrorist organizations in Asia, Middle East and Africa. He paid NSA rogue operatives and other Italian mercenaries to start uprisings in Somalia and Nigeria. He sent his undercover CIA operatives to Africa to pay fifty warlords millions of dollars and make a terrorist organization called the Bok Harem. Richard wanted to use the mercenary group to kill Africans, and take control of all their gold and diamond industry. The main objective of these Bok Harem group was to claim responsibility for all the bloodshed and killing that were taking place in those African nations. He was paying them every week, and ordered them to make videos and other confession tapes, so that everyone who watches those would think that Moslems in Africa are violent.

During Richard's career, he personally funded and started thirty-seven separate terrorist organizations, with each one named after Moslem people and Richard made sure that each group claimed responsibility for all the bombings and other terrorist attacks he and his mercenaries carried out, like the 9/11 attack in New York. He spent billions of dollars and hired writers to publish books against Islam. He paid authors to write fictions and non-fictions and create website defiling the Moslems and Russians. In the span of thirty years, Richard hired film producers to create and produce movies and documentary films about fake terrorist organizations. He also hired forty

thousand independent bloggers and journalists to constantly preach against Islam. Richard hired thousands of ex-Moslems and ordered them to call themselves Moslem in videos, and give false interviews against Islam and Moslems. He and his Italian agents spent approximately two hundred million dollars per month to create and publish fake news about Moslems. His dream was to make a Nuremberg Law like Nazi Germany and kill all Moslems the same way Germans killed all Jews. Richard's Italian employee also hired propaganda people and psychologist to portray Moslems in the most worst possible way, and use actors to record false interviews about violence, child marriage and rape, so that people watching those videos would think Moslems are evil. I was particularly sad to see this because although I was a Russian boy, Richard thought I was Moslem because my mother was born in Grozny. So, he wanted to punish me and cause me pain, by making movies and videos showing Islam as the vilest religion.

Dramatic events began to unfold less than a week after I visited my mother's family graveyard in the USSR. When I returned to the United States, Richard informed me that an impending war was breaking out in the Russian border, and civil unrest was growing exponentially against the leadership.

This was a shock to me, for when I was in St. Petersburg and Grozny, everything seemed so calm and peaceful. I didn't believe Richard at first but I was told that a trinational war was about to start after a former Soviet Air Force general received overwhelming popular support from the local population and won the Chechen election. As soon as he was made the president, he declared independence from the former Soviet Union. This act was considered treasonous to the Soviet leadership and they sent in Russian troops to Grozny to restore order.

I was at a loss as to what to do. The thought of another war wrecking my mother's homeland was frightening. I discussed our options with several of my superior officers in the Intelligence Bureau. Pentagon officials insisted that the United States military would not intervene in a Soviet domestic matter, but I was becoming impatient every time I saw the news. Hundreds of ethnic Russian civilians were dying in the gunfire exchanges.

Then to my surprise, Richard agreed to let me fly to Moscow and meet with a few of his contacts who worked at the State Duma. They were against this war and was eager to broker peace talks between Chechen leaders and their Soviet counterparts.

It was difficult to imagine that the Chechen conflict was one of the first major warfare to take place in the region after the dissolution of Soviet Union, and when I landed at the Nizhny Novgorod International Airport on a freezing morning, I felt deeply nostalgic remembering all the memories of my youth that was spent here. But I didn't have spare time to think about the past; Richard had informed me that one of his trusted friends was waiting to meet me at an inn near the historic Avtozavodsky District. Three army officers were drawing up a plan to halt the ground invasion while an Air Force colonel agreed to hold peace talks and halt bombing on civilian populations. I was inwardly grateful to Richard for allowing me and Dustin to travel to Russia and help restore peace.

Although we had to travel separately, my dear friend Dustin met me at the Moscow's Domodedovo Airport and together, we embarked on our trans-national journey. He was fortunate enough to bring all his computer equipment along, and as we traveled in rented vehicles, he was careful enough to carry his mobile transmitter and satellite interceptor in his large shoulder bag. I was grateful for his presence, because I knew Dustin was one of the best code-breakers in the world. The brilliant computer programmer had been my colleague during the days I trained at the Camp, and many times during our missions, Dustin saved my life. Before meeting our contact, we decided to set base nearby and wait for the morning to begin our work, so the rented car dropped us off at a transit hotel, thirty kilometers southeast of Moscow.

Dustin and I prepared for the meeting early the next morning, but before heading out, I contacted Richard is a direct line, and alerted him of our coordinates and updated him with our progress. I told him we were about to meet one of his contacts soon. Richard seemed delighted and he said he was hoping the war would end soon. With his blessings, I hired a taxi cab and headed to the rendezvous point.

Six minutes after we got on a freeway, I noticed that the vehicle I was in was being followed. I asked the cab driver to change the lanes but the rear car tailed close behind. Dustin, who was busy uploading a new software into his portable computer was oblivious to the imminent danger we were facing, but before I could warn him, the truck that was in front of us halted. Simultaneously, the car behind us rammed into the taxi most brutally, and I could feel the violent impact jolting me in my seat. I quickly looked over at Dustin. The computer hacker was slumped forward, likely unconscious from the impact. The poor driver who was trying to navigate over the icy road appeared dead. I scrambled to the door but the locks were jammed. I then proceeded to kick the window in order to break out but a masked man approached the side door and smashed a thick hammer into the glass. The shards flew to my face just as I felt blood trickling down my head.

I couldn't remember anything after that. When I awoke, paramedics were loading me on a stretcher. Some eyewitnesses must have alerted the police.

As I was wheeled into an ambulance, my mind was restless, because all I could think of was how Dustin was doing. I couldn't imagine what I would do if he was hurt. Then I saw him. Dustin was being tended to by a nurse, who was wrapping a thick gauze around his head. However, I was relieved to see my friend was conscious and alert.

I motioned to the paramedic to halt. "Are you okay, Dustin?" I called out to him.

The computer programmer looked at me blankly, as if in a trance. "It's gone," he whispered in anguish.

"What is gone, Dustin?"

"My computer, all my instruments, all the data I gathered so far. The guys who attacked our car took all of it away."

I tried to pacify my friend. "Listen, stop worrying about it now. All that matters is you are safe and alive."

Dustin nodded absently. "My data disc is now in their possession. But they will not be able to read it."

"How are you so sure of it?" I inquired.

"Because it was enciphered using a five-thousand-byte encryption." Dustin answered happily.

"Good work."

"That means, even with the latest technology, it would take those thieves at least ten years to decipher the code, even if they used a supercomputer."

I smiled weakly as the paramedics wheeled me away.

For the next two days, I was recuperating in a private hospital. On the third day, Richard contacted me using one of his secure lines. He said he heard about the accident and was worried about my welfare and health. Richard then gave me the contact information of another of his contacts. This mysterious contractor was stationed at a military barrack near the Russian border.

NSA stealth satellites captured images of Russian troops moving on Grozny from three directions. In December of 1994, the first fighting took place in the village of Lomaz Yurt in Nadterechny, but before the international community could intervene, the violence had escalated out of proportion.

From my secure location in a bunker at Svetlograd, I heard the news of terrible carnage taking place in various cities of Chechnya. Dustin successfully pulled up all satellite surveillance of the region and the landscape was covered with plumes of billowing black smoke.

One of the most heartbreaking news I heard was the massacre at the village of Samashki in April of 1995. International news media were reporting that Russian soldiers were torching and pillaging houses, and raping and executing civilians. I couldn't independently verify those claims, so I was desperate not to believe it. However, aerial images that I was able to access showed that the village had been reduced to rubble. A sharp moment of grief plagued my mind, as I thought that all members of my mother's distant relatives and family were most likely dead, because many of them had lived in that village.

I became increasingly desperate to do something strategic that would halt this carnage, and my dear friend Dustin managed to locate a senior Soviet diplomat who had agreed to broker a peace deal. We traveled two hundred kilometers northeast of Stavropol and found the man who claimed to be a negotiator.

Before I left for Russia, I was shocked as much as the international community to hear that a conflict was brewing and expanding along the Russian border, after the Soviet leader decided that Chechnya had been acting in a belligerent manner.

Richard had been showing great interest in the development of the civil unrests in Chechnya. On more than one occasion, he told me that there could be a great war soon, and we should be prepared for it.

At that time, I was confused. "What do you mean, prepare for it?" I had asked Richard.

"Oh, I merely meant that we should be passionate spectators, since the war in the Balkans and the Soviet Union does not concern us."

"War should always concern us," I reminded him. "Isn't that why we are doing so much work in the NSA? We are doing undercover missions every day to prevent wars and battles from taking place."

"Correction," Richard cleared his throat. "We are striving to prevent war from taking place in the West. In North America. Why should it matter to us if Russian denizens bite and quarrel with each other?"

Richard's condescending voice made me very upset, but I tried to reason with him yet again. "If you are right, and there is a civil unrest about to take place in the Soviet Union, I believe it is our duty to stop it. If we don't act, thousands of civilians could get hurt."

"Let those savages kill each other," Richard drawled, but on noticing how pale my face had become, he softened his voice, and said, "don't worry, if situation gets out of control, I am sure the State Department will authorize NSA or the CIA to intervene in some way."

One of my former instructors at the Camp was the commander of the 131st Maikop Brigade. He was the Soviet officer responsible for sending young soldiers in to their death, because at the early stages of war, nearly all members of the Brigade were destroyed while engaged in an irresponsible attack. My heart bled in pain, because I could not bear to see more people getting killed or wounded. But no matter how much I hoped for peace, the battle went on.

I felt anger towards the people who had started this terrible war, and had no pity on the young troops. They threw them in the line of fire without any consideration. Did they not care if they lost one thousand in one day? And the most unfortunate part of this war was the civilian casualties in the cities of Chechnya.

My third stop was supposed to be at an abandoned textile factory in a sprawling farmland in Rozhdestvo, a fertile ground within the Bryansk Oblast. Dustin said he knew two other computer engineers who would cooperate with us and somehow use their newly-designed software to intercept communication between the troops fighting on the ground. This approach was deemed necessary after Dustin discovered that a large number of foreign nationals entered the former Soviet Union, two weeks before the conflict in Chechnya began. One of the aerial footages we captured of the incoming belligerents showed that they were travelling in special stealth airplanes belonging to an Austrian weapon's manufacturer. I knew the logo that was on the plane. It was the jagged silver line symbolizing the eternal power of the East German secret police. I also recognized one of the men who flew into Russia. He was Werner Löger, an Austrian businessman who was very well acquainted with Cynthia's stepfather. I wondered why Richard's old friend from Austria was flying into the former Soviet Union just days before a major war broke out in the country.

I could come up with no explanation. But Dustin hesitantly told me something that worried me greatly.

The computer programmer suspected our communication line was being hacked and intercepted by some third party. When I insisted he explain himself well, he told me that the last four rendezvous we had with our Russian contacts had been compromised.

I admitted that it was strange, but I could not come up with any reason for that. Maybe, our luck ran out.

"But there is more to this than a sabotage," Dustin had whispered urgently.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"You didn't notice?" Dustin said incredulously. "Each time Richard sets up someone to meet with us, we get attacked and our equipment are stolen."

"Some third party may have overheard us," I suggested.

Dustin shook his head vigorously. "Impossible," he said flatly. "I used the most sophisticated scrambler to make that call to Richard's direct line. There was no way that conversation could have been intercepted."

"Then what are you saying?" I asked, not wanting to think the inevitable.

"The only way I can explain what has been happening, is that Richard sold us out to some mercenaries."

"You don't get it, Dustin," I calmed my friend. "Richard would not want us dead. He sent us here to meet with his contacts so that we could end this war quickly."

"I don't know," Dustin said uncertainly. "All I am saying is that someone has been alerting the criminals of our whereabouts every time you updated Richard on our location."

"Okay, I know this is difficult. And you may be right," I said.

"So, what do we do?" Dustin asked quickly. "Do we cancel the meeting with the computer engineers?"

"No, it's too late for that," I advised. "But I won't let you endanger yourself. I will go to the meeting place and make contact with your engineer friends."

"Okay, what should I do?" Dustin wanted to know.

"Sit tight," I told him. "Stay at this safehouse. No one knows about this location, so they can't hurt you. I will be back soon."

"Okay, but take the transmitter with you," Dustin pinned a small button on my jacket lapel. "This will let me know if you are okay."

"Wish me luck." I grabbed my small briefcase and drove an unmarked truck to the meeting location.

The warehouse was eerily quiet and as I entered through a metal gate. The locks were broken.

I took out my torch light and searched the interior. But there was not the faintest noise in the vast warehouse. Only a pungent odor marked the corner of a storage room.

I went inside the room to investigate what was causing the smell. I saw a stain of fresh blood on the granite floor. I carefully stepped over the pool of blood and then saw the most ghastly sight in the world. Two young men were lying on the floor. Their bodies were riddled with dozens of bullets. I scanned their clothes with my infrared lighter, but there was no fingerprint anywhere. I had no clue

who the perpetrators were. They must have been professionals, because they did not leave behind any incriminating evidence in the crime scene.

I wanted to stay and call an ambulance, but I knew it was useless. From their cold bodies, I could tell that the two computer engineers had been dead for at least several hours. Then my blood froze, as I thought about Dustin. He was all alone in the safehouse. My friend was not trained in active combat, and if our location and transmissions had been compromised, he was not safe in that secret location.

I ran to the truck and sped back to the safehouse. From a kilometer away, I saw dark smoke billowing over the small stone house. I pulled over at a distance, and approached cautiously. I prayed so desperately that Dustin would be okay, but when I came nearer, I saw that the door had been blown apart by some sort of explosives. I ignored the smoke and went inside.

Dustin was missing!

My friend was gone. But there was a Motorola radio transmitter on his desk, which Dustin had recovered from a truck wreckage and after he worked out the wavelength, he was able to monitor the communications of our enemy.

His computer was still on. Before Dustin was taken, he had searched the name of Werner Löger on his desktop: Löger was an Austrian businessman who happened to be Richard's old friend from his Stasi days. There was not much information on Dustin's computer, but I assumed that his kidnapper must have been that Austrian man. My friend had been trying to leave a clue for me behind, so that I could try to locate and rescue him.

I knew the brilliant code-breaker was kidnapped, but I hoped he would still be alive. A programmer would not be killed by ambitious captors; Dustin had too much information in his brains, so his captors would find him more useful alive. But this only meant more terror, because I didn't want to think what sort of torture methods they were going to put the young man through.

I had to find him before it was too late.

I instinctively wanted to contact Richard for help, but something about what Dustin had told me the day before lingered in my mind. Dustin was sure that it was Richard who had betrayed our location to the criminals and it was true that an old acquaintance of Richard mysteriously appeared in Russian weeks before a major regional conflict broke out.

No, I could not ask him for help. It would put Dustin in more danger.

I called the only person I thought I could trust. The man was Captain Peskov, a senior diplomat who had strong influence over the Russian Senate and its lower house, the State Duma. Peskov was my colleague when I trained at the Soviet Camp and we were both selected to conduct active missions in France and Britain. It was still the Communist Era and our headquarters were based in East Berlin. During our first week of surveillance and observation mission in West Germany, we were arrested by the West German police and were being held as spies. British agents were brutally interrogating us, and while they were transporting us to a more miserable location, I distracted the three guards who were surrounding us and allowed Peskov to escape. He was grateful to me for saving his life, and promised to return the favor one day.

I fondly remembered the days we trained together in the Camp. Each recruit tried to keep the others alive and make sure everyone succeeded in graduating as field operatives. Recruits were flown in each month, and were immediately immersed in the most rigorous training program, designed to challenge them both mentally and physically, until they were capable of making spontaneous decisions in the field. Each person in the Camp were excellently versed in two or three languages, and could easily pass as a native of that country. I was taught French and German, and struggled ceaselessly to make my speech as accent as possible. English was slightly easier for me, since I had gone to primary school in London, and had a command over the English language. However, after the first year of training, the instructors began to encourage me to learn to speak in the American way, complete with a Southern drawl. Little did I know then that my destiny was going to take me to the North American continent for the next couple of decades.

Once a recruit was fit for duty, he was considered to be an operative, and furnished with a false name, a fictional biography, and often a foreign identity. The commanders gave us assignment that were compatible with our skills. We were given projects, often requiring to eliminate certain threats, or members of a rebel group in order to preserve a governing body in some major city or country. The man in charge of Operations was known merely as the Colonel. I only knew very little detail about his personal life, but it was believed that he was the chief of staff for the military headquarters overseeing operations around central Russia, the region stretching from the Ural Mountains to this Camp in Siberia. The name itself was meant to deceive, for the facility in which I was trained was far from an ordinary camp. It did not resemble any familiar structure pegged like a tent and nor was it a subvert underground moldy bunker designed to house belligerent stowaways. This training and operations facility stretched for tens of kilometers in the heart of surveilled but unmapped portions of the Siberian forests. Aside from a handful of Kremlin staffs, few members of the government knew this place even existed. We were designed to operate in secrecy and this gave our commander, the Colonel whose real name was a state secret in

itself, significant authority to make important decisions, fatal or otherwise. I was once sent to Paris to find the two men who had defected with State secrets and were on the way to West Berlin. I had to stop them before they succeeded in reaching the other side. It was an undercover operation, but the orders were simple. I had been recently approved for combat and was therefore sent to Paris to carry out an assassination. The two men were accused of betraying the identity of five KGB officers which led directly to their capture, and subsequent torture and death. But taking the life of another human being made me terrified. It was a horrible idea, which had no justification. My instructor at the Camp insisted that we were implementing justice by killing traitors, but in my heart, I could not accept that killing was justified. I knew murder was not justice. It seemed inherently wrong to kill someone even it was for killing someone. To take a life was wrong to begin with. I could not understand how one wrong could right another wrong. But I was only a teenager, and I was bound by the code of conduct of this elite training school, and had sworn fealty to the dedicated instructors who spent years training me to be the ideal operative, the perfect agent of the State who would defend the Motherland against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

I was given the address after departing from the private jetport in the outskirts of Paris. It was a rundown hotel near Issy-les-Moulineaux, a suburban area south-west of Paris. I had the key card duplicated from before, so once I ensured no one was in the hotel lobby or hallway, I slipped inside the dimly lit hotel room. The two men were scheduled to be inside at this hour. I peered into the shadows, but there was no sign of anyone. Then I saw a movement. Two shadowy figures were racing away from the hotel. The men were escaping. Running down at full speed, I began to chase after them, but by this time, they noticed that I was after them, and one of the men halted, whipped out a large pistol and fired at my direction. The bullet grazed my shoulder, stunning me momentarily, but I recovered and kept running after them. They turned into an alley and seemed to disappear from sight, but I saw that they were trying to leap over a high fence. I used this opportunity to corner them, but before I could say a word, one of my comrades from the Camp showed up. I recognized him. He was the backup operative on the field in case I failed to do the mission. I stared wide-eyed as he calmly attached a silencer to his service weapon, and fired two clean shots into the fleeing double agents. Both men fell with a thud, hitting the ground instantly. I was certain they were dead. The executioner then turned to leave. I raced after him and berated him for shooting the men in the back, but he became very angry and demanded that I dispose of those bodies. I thought he wanted me to bury the two men but he handed me a concentrated can of gasoline, and ordered me to set them on fire to erase all evidence of our presence in Paris. However, I noticed one of the men was still alive, and I refused to burn him to death. It also seemed abhorrent to incinerate a corpse. The man who shot them shoved me aside and set to his task. He doused the two bodies with gasoline and tossed a lit matchstick over it. Like a funeral pyre, the small alley burst into flames, blinding my eyes momentarily. Then I heard the shrill cry. It sounded as though it was coming from a wounded animal or a mad beast. I scrambled to my feet and umped headfirst into the flames trying to fan it away from the injured man's body, but the sharp hot sparks burned through my shirt instantly and I was forced back. The man who shot them grabbed me and held me back. In despair, I burst into tears. It was unbearable to watch a man squirming in agony, being wounded by a gunshot and then being burned alive. I had to extinguish the flame and save him. No human, no matter how many crimes he had committed, deserved such a cruel end. I was screaming in protest, and shielded my face with my forearms and again tried to put out the fire. I must have inhaled too much of the smoke, because suddenly I doubled over in a jag of cough, unable to breathe. Then my eyes blacked out.

My reminiscence jolted me back to present day reality.

I was in need of assistance from a dear friend and so I searched for Peskov's current address.

I searched his name on Dustin's global database, and found an untraceable number.

The voice that answered sounded very familiar.

I wasted no time in exchanging pleasantries and directly asked for his help. I told him what had happened to Dustin and asked him to help me find the computer programmer.

Captain Peskov agreed readily. "Of course, I remember Dustin. I wouldn't call him a friend, but only because his computer was his best friend, da?"

"It's my fault that he is in this mess," I told Peskov. "Is there anything you can do to narrow down his location?"

"Yes, I sent you the address to my command center. Please come over. I will give you full access to our intelligence department's tracking system. If Dustin is within the Russian Federation, we will know."

"Did you have aerial image of this location?" I asked. "There could be a clue as to who took him."

Peskov replied calmly. "We have state-of-the-art countersurveillance detection system in place. So if your hacker friend show up there, they will detect it right away."

"Okay, and I told you about the Austrian man-" I began, but Captain Peskov cut me off.

“That has been taken care of. The KGB wants him as much as you do, and we have a current file photo of Werner Löger and his associates who entered the former Soviet Union illegally. I already put the faceprints through KGB’s biometric state scanners. We will get a location soon.”

“What about the freeways?” I asked again. “They probably bundled Dustin in a van or something.”

“That is expected, so, I have already linked with Moscow’s urban surveillance satellites. Now, we have visual on almost all major routes.”

I began to thank him for his help, but Captain Peskov brushed off my gratitude. “Don’t worry, we will find your friend.”

I breached the perimeter at nightfall. Captain Peskov, who had provided me with the location of this facility, had warned me that the building was heavily fortified with electronic gates and bulletproof windows, but thermal imaging did not yield any significant results. I knew Dustin was being held somewhere inside the rundown building so I decided to begin my search from the sub level floors. I searched the ground floor but it was deserted. However, in one of the generator rooms, I could hear the steady humming of a motor. There was a power source in the facility, which meant someone was running an active base of operations from here.

I followed the source of the motor, and found a bolted doorway leading to the rear end of the warehouse. Since the door was locked, I had to empty a magazine of bullets from my rifle and managed to break the lock. But all the noise I had caused must have alerted the watch guard: as soon as I went through the metal door, something hit me on the head. It was so heavy, that I was certain my skull had been crushed. I sank to the floor and became unconscious.

I awoke suddenly to the shock of darkness. My eyes frantically searched for something to cling onto, but the enveloping shadows were whole and consuming. The only thing I could hear was my ragged breaths that filled the silence of the room, echoing off bare concrete. I tried to move my limbs, but they were bound tightly to the frame of a solid metal chair. My tongue was like cotton in my mouth, and the cut of rough cloth chafed at the blistered corners of my lips. My heart beat terribly loudly in my ears, and it became louder as a panic began to thrum wildly in my bones.

At first all that came out of my mouth was a pathetic string of moans as I tried to clear my throat. Then I tried to speak, calling into the darkness. My throat scraped with the effort like sandpaper on skin and most of the sound was muffled by the coarse cloth that gagged me. A wave of despair crashed against my body, pulling my mind beneath the waves of despair and making me breathless. I broke through the wave of emotion as my eyes darted back and forth frantically. I tried with maddening impotence to search my memory for answers.

How had I gotten here?

Where was this place?

The smell of the room was foul and rotten, and the realization of my situation began to dawn. I struggled fiercely at my tight bindings, but they held strong, digging into the skin around my wrists and arms. The chair didn’t move an inch; it had been bolted into the ground. I forced myself to take long deep breaths to calm my brain down, reminding myself of my rigorous training, but the gag around my mouth made breathing harder than it had to be. I was suddenly aware of an acute pain in my nose, accompanied by the scent of iron.

My nose. It was broken. Fear rushed in cold sweats, forming a thick lump in my throat.

And then, a door opened.

My head instinctively turned in the direction of the sound of metal scraping against the floor. There was the sound of heavy footsteps approaching, and my heartbeat spiked madly. I managed to make out a couple German words before a group of men stood before me.

The man who walked in first was of medium height. He had silvery blond hair, and I recognized his piercing blue eyes instantly. It was the Austrian politician who had been Richard’s business partner for many years.

The man removed the gag from my mouth and addressed me in German. “Do you know who I am?”

“Werner Löger.” I said coldly. “Now, tell me where is Dustin?”

Löger chuckled darkly. “Your little friend is alive, and he will remain so, as long as he does what we ask him to do.”

My brain raced. I wanted to know what these Austrian men were doing in the Russian Federation, so I asked him casually, what they were doing here.

“Ah, since you asked so nicely, I see no harm in telling you my plans,” the Austrian man smiled again. “You see, once you and your friend give me all the information I need, I promise to give you both a very quick and merciful death.” The man paused. “And, if

you behave well, I may even give you a proper burial, eh. Now, you wanted to know why I came to this Soviet wasteland. Well, me and some of my dear old colleagues will be profiting from a lucrative war that will hopefully go on for several years.”

“How would you profit from a war?”

“Silly boy!” Löger laughed cruelly. “Do you know why my stealth team shot down the Russian airmen in Dolinskoye? I had given them orders to sabotage both sides and start the war, but my plan was to have a colorful New Year’s Eve, but the enlisted men in my team were eager to face action and they started the battle of Dolinskoye on the last week of December.”

“Your men launched those rocket attacks on Russian troops?” I exclaimed. I recalled the reports from the military dossier of how many Russian soldiers and officers were killed in a supposed Chechen attack.

“Of course, we made it appear as though Chechen forces attacked Russian armored troops with rockets and we knew that the Russians would then hit back with air strikes. That attack was considered to be the first serious confrontation clash since Moscow sent its soldiers into the breakaway republic.” Werner Löger was rubbing his hands together energetically as he spoke to me. “Now, tell me, who gave you the location of my command center? This location was supposed to be a secret.”

I shook my head in confusion. “I won’t tell you anything until I see my friend.”

The cheerful look on the Austrian man’s face disappeared. He looked very angry and repeated his question. I insisted that I must see Dustin first and make sure he is alive. This enraged him so much that before I realized it, his fist crashed against my jaw.

A splitting pain struck my face and for a moment the world spun like a carnival ride. A swarm of stars broke the vision of darkness and my breath was forcibly snatched from my lungs, like the vacuum of space suddenly filled my body. I fought frantically to find the air again.

There was total blackness, and a numb rush of adrenaline before the pain cracked like fissures in my jaw. All in one moment the air rushed back into my lungs and I involuntarily cried out as my body shook feverishly, trembling in trauma at the anticipation of what was coming next.

Another blow slammed into my face, this time front on, cracking my nose even further. The scream I let out was wild and full of terror-born anguish. The pain consumed me and the German voice came again. Even though I spoke Deutsch fluently, it took me a long while to translate the words in my head.

“My dear boy, if you don’t give me the information I am asking, then you will be killed.” Werner Löger’s voice was calm and collected, laced with a hint of sadistic amusement.

I suppressed a shudder and took a deep breath. “I will tell you everything after I see my friend.”

The Austrian man looked at my resolute face, and perhaps, he realized that no matter how much they hurt me, I will never volunteer any information. He finally sighed. “Very well, we will take you to him.”

He barked an order to his men and they quickly untied my hands and feet. For a moment, I almost felt free, but the tall guards grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the room into a dimly lit hallway.

I was thinking very quickly. As soon as I they place me near Dustin, I would carry out my secondary plan.

Getting captured was my plan all along, because I knew this was the only way to find my friend. But I needed my captors to lead me to the location.

After several minutes of marching, we arrived in a dark sublevel room. There was a metal cage in the center, and my dear friend was locked inside that place. Two giant dogs were barking ferociously just a few feet away, and it appeared as though they were about to attack and bite Dustin. I screamed in anger, because I knew how much Dustin was terrified of dogs. The young hacker had never even held a pistol in his entire life, and now his life was in danger because of me.

When Dustin heard my voice, he ran to the metal gate, and grabbed the bars. He told me to get him out of the cage as quickly as I could.

I gave him a brief nod as a signal, and pretended to collapse on the stone floor. One of the guards tried to grab me but I seized his weapon from the holster and forced the other to drop his gun. After both men were disarmed, I took the keys from one of them and freed Dustin from the horrible cage. I also made the two men get inside the cage and locked them in.

Escaping from the secure facility was harder than I had imagined, but I was lucky to have Dustin with me. Before he was kidnapped, Dustin was able to hack into the system and download the blueprint of the building. He knew the shortcuts, but we were still being pursued by armed guards, who had been alerted of the escaped prisoners.

I tried to run, but then realized that Dustin had an injury in his right foot. He was having trouble walking. I had to half hold him and half carry him out of the facility, and this slowed us down. But we made it out of the perimeter and jumped into one of the armored trucks belonging to the Austrian man. Dustin knew how to start a car without the keys, so he hotwired the vehicle and we were finally able to put some distance between us and our captors.

I thought the worst part of our journey was over, but this was just the beginning of our hell.

For the next three days, we were on the run. Private mercenaries hired by the Austrian politician and weapons dealer chased us across the vast countryside of Russia. Dustin was able to find shelter for us in one of his hacker friend's house, but we did not want to endanger innocent people, so we kept moving.

As we tried to stay alive, Dustin told me about what he had discovered during his research into Werner Löger's financial records.

"What exactly did you find?" I asked, noticing that Dustin looked afraid to speak.

"The order came directly from Richard. Your NSA black Ops boss."

I froze. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Richard ordered this hit on us?"

"And my kidnapping," Dustin insisted. "I have proof. He wired over a million dollars the week before Werner Löger arrived in Russia. He told Löger to kidnap me."

"Why did they want to take you? I don't understand."

Dustin swallowed hard. "Werner asked me to hack into the Russian urban satellites and used thermal imaging to locate the seventeen secret military bases of our Army."

"So, that is what these Austrian mercenaries were after," I thought aloud.

It finally made sense. Werner Löger was after Russia's weapon supplies, and he knew that the seventeen military depot that officially did not exist stored all of the country's nuclear-grade missiles. This is what he meant when he claimed this war would offer him a profitable business deal and sales of weapon.

"Yes, but why is Richard paying him so much money to steal Russian weapons?" Dustin asked me.

I shook my head. "We won't know until we confront Richard with this. I promise, I will get the truth out of him this time."

"Are we heading back to Maryland?" Dustin wanted to know. "I miss my small and secure lab in Randallstown." The hacker laughed nervously. "At least, no one was torturing or killing me there."

"Listen, we can't go back just yet," I told the computer programmer. "There is still a deadly war going on in the Russian border. Chechen and Russian civilians are dying every day because of an ugly war that was started by a corrupt Austrian man. And we are the only ones who know the truth and we have to stop this war. We must try to end the killings."

"But how?" Dustin wailed helplessly. "How can you stop this war? Both sides are angry. Look! Read the newspaper headline today. Two thousand civilians were killed in Grozny six hours ago. Do you see how much anger exists on both sides? What can we possibly do?"

"Dustin, have hope," I said sharply. "You have all the evidence we need. You were able to download the files on Werner Löger and Richard, and I will forward those copies to Captain Peskov. If we can prove to the Russian government that the war in Chechnya was started by an Austrian weapons dealer, then they will understand that this bloodshed is useless. Russians should never kill Russians. We can convince them to agree to a peace deal."

Dustin did not look convinced. "But, what about the Chechens. Russian Airmen have been bombing so many villages, that the population is very angry. What if they continue to fight?"

"I have family there," I confided to Dustin. "My mother's family still lives in Grozny. I will go there anyway to pay my respects to her burial place, and you will come with me. Together, we will meet the Chechen leader and tell them what Werner Löger's mercenaries did. Once they hear about how the Austrian criminals framed them and attacked Russian troops posing as them, then they will agree to a ceasefire, I am sure."

Dustin looked terrified at the idea of going into the heart of the battle in Grozny, but we both agreed that this was the best course of action.

Two days later, we flew a private plane to a village near the city of Stoderevskaya. From there, Dustin and I continued the journey on foot. We faced many obstacles, but after several difficult months, the hopeful day finally arrived. Two State Duma officials and a Chechen senior commander agreed to meet for peace talks.

It was already 1995, and I sincerely hoped that the end of war was near.

1992: The journey to an insane asylum

Shortly after leaving the American jail, I had no money and could not get any job.

In prison, life was most miserable but I sincerely thought all trouble would go away if I could escape the confines of the prison, because in the narrow cell, I felt as though I was being stripped off my identity. For over a year, I was labeled 0W4476, a mere cold unfeeling number belonging to an obscure inmate of an American prison system, which was printed on my prison overalls. After my release, my life was miserable. With a prison record, I was considered unemployable, and local charity agencies considered me as an

unsavable asset not worth investing in. I longed for a chance to rebuild my life. Twice, I had contemplated in using drugs and alcohol to numb insane hurt and desperate pain, but I avoided such substances because I never wanted to enter a vile prison again, and most certainly not in this uncultured metropolis of the United States of America. I never wanted to live like a caged animal again. In this dilemma, I turned to the one person I trusted most in the world. Cynthia. I found out that she was still living with Richard in the same house. Personally, it did not seem very unusual for a young woman to live with her parents, because this was the way Russian youths were raised. We respected the elders and obeyed our parents. However, in America, life was different, as I soon learned that any child could call 911 if the father shouted at him, or if the mother slapped him, and police would promptly arrive and arrest the parent, and send the child away to a foster home, where they often suffered from eternal abuse and sexual assaults. The social system in this country was unforgiving, but young people like Cynthia were still vulnerable. I knew that Cynthia had attempted to move out of Richard's home many times in the past, but each time, suspicious and unpleasant circumstances forced her to move back under his roof.

I also did not have a place to stay, so I began to sleep in the wooden benches in the public parks. The cold damp air caused my bones to ache and hundreds of lice that were cowering in the garbage dumps rushed to settle on my warm body to infest. The temperature at night fell below zero, and I was certain I would be dead. For the entire day and night, I lay awake, thrashing my legs and moving my arms to prevent myself from freezing to death. By the next morning, I was going numb from the bitter chills. That afternoon, I was experiencing delirium when Cynthia passed by the road. She stopped and recognized me. At first, she accused me of being a murderer and said Richard had a lot of evidence that I killed her father's fiancée, but eventually she took pity on my miserable conditions, and offered me a small room in her house to live in until I found a separate place to stay. I was unimaginably grateful to her for the offer and went with her to her single-story brick house. It was a tastefully decorated little house. Cynthia told me Richard had furnished it for her and comes to visit her here at least three times each day. I felt reluctant to live in a place which was so often frequented by Richard, but I had no other choice. That very evening, Richard came to say good night to his daughter. Cynthia told him that I was living in here, and as soon as he saw me, he flew into a mad rage, and screamed, tossing all the glass decorations on the floor. He trembled with fury and shook a finger in my direction, screaming that I was a career criminal who belongs to a prison, and should never set foot in Cynthia's house. Cynthia was embarrassed by her father's outburst, and I felt so ashamed to impose on her hospitality that I wanted to sink into the earth and disappear. Richard shouted even louder, and said I was a loony who would burn down her house if I had a chance. It was not my desire to disturb the peace of Cynthia's house. But then I saw the angry expression on Richard's face as he shouted that I was planning to be a permanent houseguest in his daughter's residence. The darkness of the evening shrouded the sinister pale glimmer of his eyes and I decided to leave the family in peace.

I never understood why Richard said I would destroy and burn this house. I thought it was a preposterous idea. Why would I ever want to burn Cynthia's house? I felt utterly humiliated so I secretly made a plan to move out of her house the same night. I could not tolerate the insult of being treated like a villain and criminal. However, I knew Cynthia would object and insist that I live in her house, but I much rather preferred to live on the streets with bugs and filth than seek mercy from a man who hated me so much. At midnight, I packed my shirt and a blanket, and slowly tiptoed out of the house. I began to walk into the darkness and disappeared into the night. I fell asleep near an old church building and when I awoke, it was daylight. I stood up with my little belongings, and waited at a bus stop. Just as the bus was pulling up, I noticed six police officers running towards me. I thought they were chasing some criminal down the road, so I remained where I was. Seconds later, they were slamming me to the ground and dragged me to a police car. I protested vehemently, and demanded an explanation about why I was being arrested. The police only shouted angrily, calling me a Russian psychopath. The driver of the police car said I should stop acting innocent, because all Russian people are crazy criminals. I stared stupefied at him. What have I done to deserve such criticism? How did the American policeman know I was a Russian national? I was not carrying any identifying papers with me. But I also knew how most law enforcement agencies in the United States mistrusted me due to my Russian origins. It was a result of inbred discriminatory racism, which enhanced these persecutions and encouraged the racialization of a demography, leading to actions that promote the encroachment of Russian communities on space that is presumptively and imperially assumed as American. This method of xenophobia was an attempt to ensure an undisturbed visual record reflecting white American homogeneity of the future. Such attempts to foreclose and refuse space to Russian speaking communities caused much distrust between the Soviet Union and the United States, and it also increased the rate of hate crimes and physical violence against Russians, who were systematically rejected belonging, refused citizenship and lived in fear with unending spatialized forms of violence. The policeman saw the shadow of sorrow over my face and he finally said I was stupid to burn down my girlfriend's house. My heart stopped!

"Cynthia's house?" I cried out. "It got burned?" He did not answer me so I entreated him to tell me what happened?

The policeman laughed. "You are really crazy, man!" He said. "You burned the lady's house, and you ask me what happened."

"I swear I did not burn her house!" I sobbed, fearing that something had happened to Cynthia. "Was anyone hurt?" The policeman glanced at me in his rearview mirror. "Nah, the place got burned to ashes, but your girl-friend was able to get out before the fire started."

I sighed in relief, and watched the street through tear-glazed eyes, as the police vehicle sped to the precinct. Nothing else mattered to me now. Cynthia was not injured in the fire.

At the police station, a detective questioned me for several hours. He asked me why I decided to burn down Cynthia's house, and I told him the truth, explaining how I left in the middle of the night and was not even aware that her house was burned.

Then he produced my cigarette lighter and a set of fingerprints, and said my lighter and my prints were all over the stove and oven of Cynthia's house, confirming that it was me who burned her house down.

I protested again, and insisted on my innocence, but the police were sure I was the criminal. They even brought in eight eye-witnesses who were neighbors. All of them gave sworn written statements saying that I had threatened to burn down Cynthia's house. But it was so untrue! I never threatened to do such a cowardly thing, and I did not understand why Cynthia's neighbors all bore false witness against me.

The detective continued to threaten me with a life term in prison, and this statement rang a preemptive sadness in a corner of my mind. For me, the mode for misery was more than a never-ending sorrow of slow death. The futurity of death was inevitable, and to me, was in fact much desirable, but occasionally I was still afraid of the violent futurity of a slow death, of being in the constant state of being tormented and worn out by fear of pain and violence, and to die alone in a forgotten prison cell.

Another speedy trial took place, and to my surprise and sorrow, Cynthia personally appeared on the stand and testified that I had likely burned down her house. Richard spent hours on the witness stand, testifying tearfully that I was a crazy man who wanted to kill his daughter and burned down her house in revenge. I did not understand why they were all lying about me, but a state-appointed attorney later told me that someone had left pieces of my clothing and DNA and fingerprints all over the burned house. It was not Cynthia's fault. She really believed I was guilty. The prosecutor demanded a life sentence for me, and asked the judge to send me to a psychiatric ward. The judge agreed, and as my cheeks got scorched with hot tears, he sentenced me to life without parole in a state Psychiatric Facility in Maryland.

My heart ached bitterly with the thought of spending the rest of my life in a mental asylum, but what terrified me even more was that the prosecutor also secured a permission from the judge, allowing doctors at the asylum to conduct electro-shock therapy on my and forcefully inject me with sedatives and other mind-altering drugs. With a pang of sadness, I realized that Richard had successfully convinced the judge that I was crazy.

I did not have the opportunity to defend myself, and when the judge asked me if I regretted burning down the house of my girl-friend, the question sounded so unfair and wrong to me, that I burst into a fit of passionate tears, and unable to speak, crumpled to the ground. Americans were more reserved in displaying their emotions, but I could not control my tears. Somehow, my emotional outburst made the judge think I was truly insane, and he sentenced me to this cruel fate of spending another fifty years in a mental health clinic, and being forced to live with dangerous criminals.

The first week in the Psychiatric facility was like entering into hell itself. For seven hours each day, doctors applied electric shocks to my brain, presumably to make me sane and normal, so that I would not feel like burning down anyone's home. I begged the doctors to spare me the terrible pain and insisted that I was innocent, but they ignored me completely.

"Would to God that I had died!" I cried, unable to suppress my tears of pain.

I was certain that I would die from the constant electric jolts to my head, and with each passing day, I became less and less oriented. My speech became slurred, and I almost found it impossible to write my journals. My hands would shake vigorously if I tried to write. Such dreadful was my condition. Until one day, I heard a familiar voice in the lobby of the ward. It was Anastasia! The woman who had practically raised me and was sent to America along with me, to pose as my official family for the American courts. I cannot express in words the joy I felt when I heard her voice. I knew she would save me. She was a brilliant operative in the GRU and I had no doubt she would find a way to release me from this horrible asylum.

I overheard angry conversations. It was Anastasia speaking fiercely to the doctors on duty, because they were not permitting her to see me. After several hours, I was finally shown to a bare room with only one chair. My official mother was waiting for me. I was still slightly disoriented and weak due to the shock therapy, but she greeted me warmly and said that Richard had paid the doctors several million dollars to administer illegal treatment on my brains. She also promised to break me out of the mental asylum very soon.

I was horrified to find out Richard was personally responsible for putting me in here, but I also knew if Anastasia promised to get me out, she would find a way.

The next morning, a short man in guard's uniform led me away from the other prisoners, and hurriedly made me get inside a small trolley. I crawled in and he wheeled me out of the facility. One hour later, I was dropped in front of a small farm house. When I went inside, Anastasia was waiting for me. I smiled happily and was about to thank her, when I saw she was holding a gun. I tried to get closer to her, but she raised the weapon and pointed at me. It was only then that I noticed a deep bullet wound in her abdomen.

The Russian woman had been shot! I rushed to assist her but she immediately fired the gun, and her unsteady hand made the aim go awry, and it grazed my shoulder blade. I hastily ducked behind a sofa and called out to her, begging her to explain why she was shooting at me, the boy she raised as her very own son. In a weak voice, she said I was indeed crazy, and had tried to kill her multiple times since this morning. Anastasia said it was I who shot her, so she wanted to make sure I could not kill her this time. I thought my ears were deceiving me. How could she think I had shot her? I loved her like my own mother!

"You have just saved me from the terrible insane asylum, and I am eternally grateful to you!" I cried out to her. "Why would you think I shot you?"

Gasping, she replied, "I saw you! I saw you fire the gun at me, point blank!"

"It was not me," I cried again. I wanted to throw myself at her feet and lay my head on her knees, but I knew if I got any closer, she would likely shoot me to death, so I sank to my knees instead, sobbing and gasping for breath.

"Why would I ever want to hurt you?"

"Don't ask me," Anastasia replied in a cold tone. "Maybe the doctors were right. They warned me that you would try to kill anyone who tried to save you!"

"Please, mother!" Weeping, I implored. "Let me help you! You must get to a hospital!"

"My help is already on its way," she replied. "I phoned the police and told them you tried to kill me."

"But I did not! Whoever shot at you was not me!"

"I have practically raised you," she retorted. "I could recognize you anywhere. Besides, the doctors at the mental hospital did say you were mentally disturbed and would try to say that the man who shot me was your double or look-alike. But I know better."

"But you must believe me!" I sobbed bitterly. "I love you like my own mother!"

"You are insane!" The woman I considered my own mother shouted.

"Crazy people often kill the very people they claim to love."

Her words cut like daggers in my heart. I felt extremely perplexed and downcast because the deep and painful emotions within me were making me breathless with confusion and sorrow. I did not know what to say to make this gentle and honest woman believe I was not going to hurt her.

Suddenly, I fell upon my knees and burst into passionate tears.

"I regret freeing you from the insane asylum, but this time, you will have to remain locked up for good!" The Russian woman stated coldly, speaking loudly so her words could be audible above the echoes of my grief-stricken sobs.

Her chilled voice made fresh pain shoot through my pulsing heart, and I felt as though I had become an orphan all over again. Then I heard a police siren nearing and I realized that they would arrest me again if they found me in the room. I hid outside the farmhouse and waited until they whisked Anastasia to a hospital. Once the surgeons operated on her, she was out of immediate danger, but doctors were skeptical about her chances of recovery. The next morning, I saw she was stirring slowly. I placed an oxygen mask on her face, but Anastasia was still breathing laboriously. I knew she was in pain, so I fell upon my knees and prayed fervently to God to save her from all harm. After praying by her bedside for a long time, I lay with my face to the floor, hoping the voice of God would guide me to the right path.

For the next ten days, I stayed awake all day and all night, sitting vigilant by her bedside, praying desperately so that she recovers. I knew she believed that I shot her, but I still loved her for she was the closest thing I had for a mother.

She thought I was her enemy, but I had to protect her. I knew whoever shot her might try to kill her this time, so I hired two special guards to stand guard at her door twenty-four hours a day.

After her discharge from the hospital, I rented a large house near a hill, and hired a gardener and three security guards to watch her and keep her safe throughout her old age.

Sometimes, I would stand at the distant hill and watch her plant saplings and walk leisurely with her cane.

Many times, I resisted the urge to go inside the house and greet her, and comfort her but I knew she thought I was a dangerous criminal and would likely try to shoot me again, and so I had to be satisfied with loving her from a distance.

February, 1995

Dustin and I were closely tracking one of the terrorist attacks that were supposed to take place in America. After speaking to a friend who worked in the criminal investigation department in New York, I learned that the American Federal Bureau of Investigation received an anonymous tip from a mercenary who worked for Cynthia's stepfather, and they began to prepare for a massive search for several hundred Middle Eastern men. The mercenaries and criminals who worked for Richard planted high-powered explosives in twelve FBI regional office buildings, and framed hundreds of American Moslems for it. The entire Defense Department of the United States became vigilant and were trying to locate the bombs and the perpetrator of the attacks. Meanwhile, Richard and his friends in the House of Representative were lobbying the American president to deport and imprison all Moslems inside concentration camps. However, the American president was refusing to agree. He insisted that all American citizens were equal and unless an actual bomb attack took place, he would not punish or imprison anyone.

I became desperate to make sure the bombs inside all the FBI building were removed, so I called the FBI director and told him that some mercenaries were planting bombs in their office buildings and they should check it immediately. However, the FBI director did not believe me. They thought I was giving a hoax threat.

I knew I had to remove the bombs myself so I took my personal car near the Federal building and slipped inside the sub-level floors. Inside, I found that the foundation pillars of the buildings were rigged with plastic explosives. That was why the FBI agents could not detect it when they checked the location.

I spent the next four days, staying in the building for hours at a time, and using hand tools like pliers and shovels to remove the bombs and attached wires from the FBI building.

One day, when I was removing another huge pile of explosives from the building, several FBI agents came it with weapons drawn. The screamed and shouted. And forcibly arrested me, and charged me with terrorism.

I was shocked. I asked them why they were charging me with crimes, and one of the interrogators said that Richard told them I was a dangerous terrorist and was trying to kill FBI agents by detonating bombs in their office building. I tried in vain to explain that I was innocent. And that I was in the FBI building's basement to remove the bombs. But no one believed me.

I even showed the FBI interrogators evidence of how I could not have planted those bombs. I was risking my life trying to deactivate the explosive charges.

But they laughed and taunted me. I soon realized that they were paid or bribed by Richard and his corrupt mercenary agents who worked in the U.S. government.

There was only one woman who was working as a visiting agent in the FBI building. Her name was Margaret. She was a former British intelligence officer who came to the FBI office in New York to train for a criminal investigation project. When she came to question me in my cell, I was frightened by her stern appearance. A woman sat behind the desk with a piercing sharp look in her eyes.

Her head was full of short grayish-hair, dark in color. Her silence gave me fright, and I felt a fire engulfing my heart, tearing off what was left of my mind. She accused me of being responsible for the bombing, but I explained that I was framed. She wanted proof of my claim, so I asked her to take me to my work place, where I kept all the evidence. The woman begrudgingly agreed, and she drove me to the office.

As soon as I entered my work office, three masked men jumped up from behind the door and began to shoot speedily in my direction. They were trying to kill me, and I did not even have a gun to defend myself with. However, the British lady who was working in the Federal Bureau of Investigation quickly pulled out her gun and shot the assailants. I barely survived that day, and was very grateful to the stern woman for saving my life.

The British woman took me back to the FBI building and she told me that I was probably speaking the truth about being framed. She understood that those mercenaries who had framed me for the bombings in the FBI building were now trying to kill me, so she risked her life to believe in my truth and protect me from the real criminals.

I was glad that the woman finally supported me in my quest to find the truth. It was refreshing to see that after five different FBI interrogators ignored my pleas and refused to listen, a woman had more courage and bravery in her to take the risk of believing what I told her. Sometimes, it seems that one brave woman is more courageous than one thousand brave men.

The British woman began to continue her investigations, and discovered that some of her colleagues in the FBI were corrupt, and took bribes from Richard's criminals to have me framed and arrested for crimes they were planning to carry out.

One morning, she burst into my office and drew out her gun. She threatened to kill me instantly if I did not tell her where her daughter is.

I was horrified to hear this. I asked her what happened to her daughter, and the British woman said that I had kidnapped her little girl. I asked her why she thought I did it, and she replied that an anonymous caller informed her that I had kidnapped her daughter. I

denied vehemently and promised to help find her child, but the woman did not listen to me. She tried to shoot me with her gun, but I ran away and escaped.

I was worried about the child. I had no doubt in my mind that Richard and his criminal employees had kidnapped the British woman's daughter to intimidate and threaten her into ceasing the investigation into the bombing, so I ran straight to Richard's headquarters, and questioned two of his guards. One of them admitted that he overheard Richard say that the British woman's daughter was locked inside a residential house in a suburban neighborhood.

I called the British woman and told her about the location in which the kidnappers had kept her child. She and I went to the house together to rescue the little girl, but as soon as we entered, the locks clicked into place and we were trapped inside the house.

I was nearly killed by Richard's mercenaries as I was approaching the guarded house, but I was prepared to risk my life to make sure the little girl was safe.

Once we were inside, I told the woman to locate her daughter. She found her child tied to a small chair. But she was unharmed.

The woman carried the baby girl and was about to leave the house, when I noticed copper wires running along the perimeter of the house, and glued to all the door sill. After inspecting the door closely, I saw that the entire house was rigged with explosives, and the walls were all lined with plastic explosives. It meant that if either one of us tried to open the windows or the door to exit the house, the entire house would explode, and kill everyone in it.

The British woman realized that we were trapped in this house, so we waited until it was dark. And I tried to break a window and help the woman and her child escape, but it was a mistake. Richard had hired assassins to wait outside the house and shoot at us if we tried to leave the vicinity. I knew there was no other way to escape so I rigged one of the plastic explosives, and blasted a hole in the ground of the first floor. A huge hole appeared in the floor and the narrow passage allowed the woman and her baby to slide into the basement of the house and escape through the small tunnel inside.

Once we were safely outside the bombed house, I helped the British woman hide her child from the assassins. The woman was very angry when she found out that Richard was responsible for kidnapping her child, so she ordered me to take her to Richard's vacation home in Maryland. I told her it was very dangerous and that she should stay with her daughter. The woman agreed and I helped her fake her own death so that Richard would never be able to bother her again.

However, after the woman left, I drove to Richard's personal residence, and found him lounging near a swimming pool. He was surrounded by several young men. Two of them were Italian male supermodel, scantily clothed. They were entertaining Richard and dancing to music in the pool, and some of the men were dressed in red skirts like women. I was confused about what I saw, and I thought Richard had hired male escort service for his entertainment. Before that day, I did not know that Richard was homosexual. I knew he loved his daughter, more than anything and anyone else in the world.

I wanted to confront Richard and warn him never to hurt any child like the British woman's daughter again, but I knew if I tried to approach Richard, he would fire his weapon at me, and I would be forced to shoot him.

However, I detested the idea of killing him. I did not want to become a murderer. Yes, Richard was evil, but I did not want to be responsible for the death of Cynthia's stepfather.

It seemed morally wrong.

This time, when I returned to the United States, I was determined to find out the truth. After landing in JFK Airport, I took a connecting flight directly to Virginia to meet Richard in his private office. I grabbed the briefcase that was filled with evidence and recording of Richard directly ordering his men to attack and kidnap Dustin, and I strolled into his office building. His secretary tried to stop me, but I brushed past her and entered his office.

Richard gave a wide smile of happiness when he saw me. "You are back," he said warmly. "I am glad you are safe."

I felt betrayed by his insincerity so I raised my voice and said, "You tried to have me killed. Because of you, Dustin was tortured and nearly died."

Richard looked surprised. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't lie to me anymore," I said exasperatedly. "I want the truth. Listen to these recordings. All of these calls went directly from your office line, and they are recorded conversations between you and your old associate from Austria, Werner Löger. You sent him money to sabotage the Russian Federation, and when Dustin discovered your plans, you tried to torture him and kill me as well."

Richard quickly sank into his leather chair. He hid his face in his hands, and whimpered. I thought he was crying. Finally, the middle-aged man spoke. "Look, I know you will not want to believe me, but the truth is very complicated. Yes, I made those phone calls. I had to order Werner to kill you, but it was the worst moment of my life. I was forced."

"I don't believe you," I said instantly. "I heard the recordings. You cheerfully commanded your Austrian friend to torture Dustin and extract information."

Richard raised his face. There was water in his eyes. "I am sorry you don't believe in me, but the truth is one of my colleagues was standing right there, across this table. He pointed a gun to my head, and told me to make the call to Werner, and order the kills. I didn't want to do it, but he said he would shoot me if I didn't obey him. Believe me, I really hoped you would survive and come back."

Richard spoke with such warmth and kindness that I couldn't find any words to describe my feelings. He was Cynthia's father, and I wanted to believe his words.

Richard saw that I was confused, so he walked over the table and hugged me for a long time. "I am so happy to see you again," he said softly, and tears glistened in his face. "I really am. It pains me to think you would ever imagine I would want to hurt you. You are a son I never had."

He spoke in a very affectionate paternal kind of way, and for a moment, I trusted him completely. In many ways, I saw him as a father figure. I decided to believe him and left the office as quickly as I came.

Meanwhile, the Italian naval officer and his German friend started a civil war in Yemen and used the chaos to launch air strikes and missiles to Saudi Arabia. They were planning to control all of the Middle Eastern monarchies by funding civil wars within their nations. After creating an imaginary Shiite terror group in Yemen, the European and Italian mercenaries systematically starved ten million of Yemen's civilian population, and made the Saudi government believe that the Yemeni people were waging this war. Every day, the Italian man ordered his men to launch hundreds of missiles towards the Saudi royal palaces, and told Riyadh that Yemenis are doing it. This caused a heated war in the border region, and thousands of Saudi and Yemeni civilians died. The Italian-American naval officer also wanted to take revenge on the Syrian intelligence agency for briefly arresting and torturing him. He started an uprising against Syria to take down the government that tortured them. Once again, his civil war was heavily depended upon Shiites fighting Sunnis and launch offensives against the Syrian legitimate government. This attack caused the Syrian army to kill millions of civilians, because they thought the Sunni population was rebelling against them. The Syrian government did not know that all of the fake ISIS stories were a creation of the Italian man and his German friend.

One of Richard's favorite employees was an Italian-American man who was the chief of American Army's special forces division. The Italian man sent an entire team of his mercenaries into China to steal Chinese weapons and technology, and they also blew up several Chinese government buildings and framed Uighur Chinese Moslems for the attacks. This caused the Chinese government to retaliate and imprison millions of Chinese Moslem in concentration camps. However, those Chinese Communist leaders had no idea that the real culprit who was destroying their nation was actually an Italian man who was framing Moslem for all his crimes.

Eventually, the Italian man was arrested by Syrian intelligence department and was interrogated rigorously. After he escaped, Richard's Italian employee decided to take revenge on Syria and the two men plotted to kill the Syrian president and occupy Lebanon, and use Hisbulla to start a war between Israel, Lebanon and Syria.

When I learned of this plot, I was nervous. So I went to Israel, and spoke with several IDF generals and five Sayeret Matkal leaders. I told them about Richard and his Italian friend who were framing Lebanon and Syria for the fake ISIS groups and used Hisbulla to start a civil war in the region. They believed me and agreed to do a ceasefire. Soon after that, my adopted family moved temporarily to Pakistan, and Richard again tried to attack them. This time, he hired the Italian army commander to bomb Pakistan, but the Italian man wanted power for himself so he did not listen to Richard, and instead, became busy with funding several uprising in the Middle East, using the Arab Spring as an excuse to start global warfare.

The Italian-American naval officer was a ferocious man, and he was able to destroy the Middle East much more than Richard could ever do in the last 40 years. Cynthia's father certainly hired the right man for the job. The amount of hatred the Italian man has for the Moslem religion and the creative and brilliant ways he frames them was more sophisticated than what Richard could do in many years.

I realized he was a passionate Mediterranean man who was constantly making films and preaching hatred to the American people. I lived in America for many years, and I knew one thing about those people. Americans are fairly tolerant nation, and they were not Islamophobes or hateful. Even though Richard and his Italian friend spend twenty years giving fake news, and making fake movies lying about Moslems, the vast majority of the American citizens were merciful and tolerant to minority groups. Most Americans were very forgiving, just and loving. If it had been in any other country of the world, and if they had so much hatred being preached at them, then they would definitely start a Holocaust and kill all their Moslem population.

The next week, when I met the chief of the security detail which protected my adopted mother and her children, I asked the men about what they knew about the criminals Richard had hired to hurt my family. They told me that Richard had paid billions of dollars to a German mercenary who was also a famous weapons smuggler.

"The German former BND officer was also hired by Richard. It was his idea to make Myanmar become powerful."

I asked them. "How?"

"He paid Myanmar's generals billions of dollars to kill all of their Moslem population, and then to take over the neighboring countries in India and Pakistan."

"Why?"

"Your adopted family moved to East Pakistan temporarily, so the pimps decided to use Myanmar's military government to attack that country and kidnap your sister. The German man also ordered the Burmese Buddhist soldiers to kill approximately three hundred thousand civilians in Myanmar, and rape and kill half million Moslem Rakhine."

"Are you saying he planned to invade an entire nation just to kidnap my adopted family and hurt the girl?" I questioned.

"Yes, they are insane," my friend replied. "Richard paid them billions of dollars to do it, so they are prepared to kill anyone and destroy any nation to hurt your family."

"But was he also responsible for creating Project ISIS in Syria and Iraq?"

"We believe so, but the ISIS attacks were controlled by the Italian man."

I nodded. I remembered that this Italian-American admiral tried to orchestrate a greater attack on the Middle East, and that is the reason he organized the Arab Spring in 2010. He had particularly targeted Egypt, and tried to overthrow the government. His German friend used the Project ISIS agents in Egypt to kill and then publicly claim responsibility for the murders of six Coptic priest who were executed in the Sinai Peninsula. The Italian man wanted to start a civil war in Egypt by turning Moslem Arabs against Christian Arabs by giving this fake fight. I later found out that the Italian man and his German friend were hoping to frame all of the ISIS sex slavery and other crimes on the Egyptians.

He also paid several Iranian army officers and ten senior Pakistani army chiefs to frame their own government for crimes against humanity. The Italian naval commander wanted to overthrow the governments of Iran and Pakistan and use their atomic weapons to attack other nations which dared to oppose him.

I asked my friend. "Then why did he halt ISIS attacks in 2017?"

"The Italian mafia man was arrested by the Department of Homeland Security, after he was caught giving a bomb attack in a nightclub in Orlando. The U.S. Intelligence department found out that the Italian man was giving all of those ISIS attacks and framing Moslems and Arabs for it, so they arrested him, and interrogated him. After the DHS kept him in detention, he stopped giving terrorist attacks for a few years."

"This Italian criminal was also busy in China."

"What was he doing in China at this time?"

"He was destroying several Chinese submarines and framing Saudi citizens for it, because he wanted China to invade and bomb Saudi Arabia. So, the Italian man and his German friend killed twenty Saudi army officers and left their bodies inside a Chinese submarine and told the Chinese government that Saudi Arabian military was sabotaging their naval system. We are fortunate that the Chinese premier did not want to retaliate."

"You mentioned that the ISIS group was made by the Italian man and his German friend, correct?"

"Yes, they created the entire sex-slavery together."

"Are you sure they made the ISIS sex-trafficking organizations just to hurt my family?"

"We are positive. They made the entire sex slavery organization named it after Islam, and made camps and kidnapped women just to put your sister in it."

I asked perplexed. "What about the thousands of interviews on television? The thousands of women crying to journalists? There have been approximately over three thousand documentaries showing journalists interviewing women who talked about slavery and rape stories? Was all of it created for my sister? Is she that important to them, that they would make such a huge organization for her only?"

"I think they went to all of these elaborate planning because they are afraid of us. They think we are powerful and so they know we will try to protect your family. This is why they wanted to frame Arabs and other Moslems when they kidnap her, so that we don't take revenge on them, and instead, we will think that the young American nun joined the ISIS jihadi group and joined their sex cult on her own will." He commented. "By giving fake interviews on YouTube, and producing Hollywood movies, showing hundreds of young women who joined the ISIS slavery group, these pimps were hoping we would think that it was natural for all young women to run away from their family and join these sex slavery traffickers."

"Why do these people listen to these criminals?" I asked, frustrated.

"Those people are desperate for money and power and they think the only way they will get it is by listening to Richard and his mercenary group."

"Can we somehow stop the group that's paying them? If they don't get payment, then they will stop doing all these terrorist activities and stop framing Muslims."

My friend shook his head. "You can't possibly stop their group. They have billions of dollars. And Richard stashed his money across three hundred banks in Europe and South America. He also has almost two hundred private security companies like the Blacksand, and League 13, which he uses to carry out all his criminal activities."

"Richard has hired hundreds of men to attack your family, and those criminals were trying to kidnap your sister. I really think we're doomed. One of the kidnappers is very powerful. They bribed local police and authorities. There is really no way we can continue to protect her. Those criminals have bases everywhere. If it was ten or twenty men, then I could have hired ten agents to protect your family, but they are spread over Europe, China, India and Russia."

"Why is Richard using all his money and resources to hurt my family?"

"He ordered his criminals to kidnap and sell your sister into human trafficking industry. He thinks that will cause you a lot of pain."

"I wish I knew myself why the little girl is so special to him. What does he think that she is to me?"

"Maybe Richard thinks that she is your daughter?"

"That is absurd. It is common sense that she could not be my daughter. A simple DNA test could prove that I'm not related to her by blood at all. With all of his smart agents, Richard should have known that. They could've easily collected and found out that she is not my daughter or sister. This little girl is just the daughter of a woman who I imagined was my mom some 40 years ago. And I never went near that family for the last 25 years. Why is he still so obsessed with her?"

"Oh God! I wish she was never born a girl. What a horrible world for a girl to be in! And only if she'd gotten married at a young age and had some children then maybe Richard would stop attacking her and planning to torture her. Oh, why did all of this horror befall my family because of me?"

"It's not your fault. And even if the young college girl was married, or had children, it would not have stopped that sick perverted obsessed psychic Nazi bastard."

"How can you be so certain?" I asked.

"I really didn't want to tell you this before, but I tried not to. Now, I guess you should know."

"What should I know?"

"Richard ordered those hired pimps to kidnap your adopted sister and make her a prostitute and to make sure she has many children."

"He ordered them? It can't be! That's crazy. What will Richard do with her children if she ever has any?"

"Those mercenaries were ordered to take her children away as well, and sell them into child sex rings and human slavery. One of our agents in your family's protective detail was able to capture a pimp, and he was carrying several packets of fertility pills."

"What?"

"Yes, imagine how perverted they are. I mean, they have not been able to approach her, and yet they are carrying fertility pills to make sure she gets pregnant and gives birth to children, so that they could get paid extra money from Richard. They also had mind-altering drugs to wipe her memory after she gave birth to children."

"But what will Richard do with her imaginary unborn kids?"

The captured mercenary told us he was promised additional payments if they manage to make the American nun a prostitute and pimp out her children. Richard believes you care about that family, so he wants to sell those children into sex slavery from the age of one or two, and raise them as sexually abused children. Somehow, he thinks this will cause you unimaginable pain."

"I can't believe Richard would do something so terrible!"

"I didn't want to believe it at first, but now I realize how sick your old boss is. In my fifty years as a CIA officer, I have seen many bad people but I have never seen someone so perverted."

When I heard this, I felt so sick and sad that I wanted to throw up. The little girl was not even related to me, and yet, Richard not only planned to kidnap her, but planned to hurt her future children as well.

What kind of a sick deviated man was Richard!

How could he get so obsessed over hating me? How could a human being be so sick and evil and violently vicious? No animal and no monster and no devil would think of this kind of torture in the world.

I felt like crying over myself over my past sins. I wept thinking of my accursed Union with my only lover Cynthia! What misery and danger did our love bring into the world! My love for her destroyed me and destroyed my family and is almost destroying the world.

The attacks on the Russian woman's family was going on ever since her daughter was born.

The next month, the Russian woman had taken the newborn child to the hospital for a checkup. I learned of this several hours later, and immediately rushed to the pediatric hospital to make sure the place was safe. I went to the front desk and they gave me the room number on the sixth floor where the mother and child were checked in. Without missing a step, I did not wait for the elevators and raced directly to the sixth floor. I burst into the ward and checked the room. There was no one inside. Panic bubbled in my chest as I frantically searched the bed and shuffled blankets to locate the child. But the hospital room was empty. The ruckus I caused made so much noise that a doctor arrived momentarily, his white coat flowing behind him and a stethoscope hanging from his neck. He had piercing eyes and a very hard face, and in a professional tone, asked me who I was looking for. I asked him where the newborn child was, and he replied that the baby girl and her mother were taken to the ground floor to get a standard blood test. I bolted to the hallway, and ran the six stories down to the first floor and entered the blood sample room. But only two elderly patients were being prepared for a blood test. The Russian woman and her baby were not there! The attending nurse informed me that no young woman had come this morning. That was when I knew the doctor in the ward had lied to me! I raced back up, skipping three to four steps at a time, as I tried to get back to the pediatric wing of the hospital. When I passed the fourth-floor staircase, I noticed the white coat. He was pushing a baby stroller hurriedly into the elevator. I raced in to catch the elevator door, before it slid and closed, but the doctor saw me chasing him, and he whipped out a gun from inside his medical garb and fired at me. I ducked behind a water dispenser and took cover, but the fake doctor fired again, blowing large holes into the wall above my head. Then the shooting stopped. I raised my head. It was too late! The elevator door shut noiselessly, and it sped to the ground floor.

I began to jump down the stairs again, this time, racing to beat the elevator. But I was too slow. When I reached the first-floor landing, the elevator was empty. I asked everyone wildly if they saw a doctor leaving this lobby, and one woman said she saw a man in a white coat run outside with a baby in a stroller. I needed to hear no more, as I bolted from the hospital, and weaved along the streets, racing desperately over the rough sidewalks, with hot tears stinging my eyes. Only one thought rang in my head. I must find the child! Directly across the hospital, the traffic light changed colors. Traffic began to move, and in the throng of pedestrians, I saw the tail of the white coat which past a taxi cab and toss the baby inside and take off. I ran after the yellow taxi, but it sped away. I knew if I lost track of the cab, then I would lose the child forever. Without a second thought, I jumped into a waiting ambulance, and drove off, chasing the taxi. But it was already several kilometers away, so I switched on the emergency lights of the ambulance. Traffic cleared immediately and I was able to cut through the red lights and keep the taxi cab in my sights. I did not want to risk getting too close to the taxi in case the fake doctor decided to use the Russian woman's child as a hostage or attempt to kill her. I stayed behind several cars, so the kidnapper would not realize he was being followed. The taxi sped through the highway for one hour, and then pulled over near a warehouse. I stopped behind some trees and hid the ambulance out of sight, and then got out. Three armed men were standing in the front yard, waiting for the fake doctor to bring the child to them. The baby girl was crying loudly again, and the man in the white coat slapped her tiny face to silence her. Blood boiled in my head, as I saw his cruelty towards the newborn baby, but I knew it was too dangerous to reveal myself. I wanted to get a clear look at the men who were waiting. One of them carried two large suitcases. The fake doctor handed the baby over to the man in the middle. He was a balding fat man, with a round protruded stomach and short arms. I gasped so loudly that I was afraid they heard me. The man was Richard!

My lips parted and a tight cry rose in my throat, but I forced myself to remain silent. I had to remain hidden and avoid giving up my position too soon.

This was impossible. I must be the victim of some hallucination. I scrutinized the faces of the men carefully. There was no doubt about it. Richard was eagerly waiting for the man to hand over the infant to him.

Horrible thoughts raced in my mind. Why had Cynthia's stepfather ordered the kidnapping of this baby? What did he want with the Russian woman's only daughter? The man in the doctor's coat looked impatient. Richard motioned to one of his men to open the suitcase. It was full of American dollars. The fake doctor began to argue loudly. He told Richard he was promised four suitcases of cash upon delivering the baby to him. The former director of the NSA assured him in an oily voice that his full payment will be wired to him only after the child had been sold into a well-established international trafficking ring.

The moment I heard the men were planning to sell this baby to human traffickers, I could not restrain myself and threw myself over the concrete floor, rolling over my back and spine, firing carefully first at the fake doctor, and then at the two seriously armed guards standing adjacent to Richard.

Richard saw his guards fall to the ground and he mistakenly uttered "*Verdammte Schweine*" under his breath. This was the only time I personally witnessed him forfeiting English vocabulary and using his native tongue.

The little girl was crying pitifully in his arms, and I moved closer and snatched the child away from him.

"Why?" I cried out, waving the gun with one hand, and keeping a firm grip on the infant. "Why did you take this baby from her mother?"

"I was trying to protect her," he replied softly.

"That is bullshit!" I shouted. "You sent this killer to the hospital to kidnap her! I heard what you said to the fake doctor. You told him you planned to send this baby to human traffickers!"

For a second, Richard placed a hand on his head. His short, stubby fingers pressed hard on his skull while his brows contracted as if in pain. The NSA covert division's director continued to insist he had the child brought here to keep her safe.

"Safe? From whom?" I asked, trembling in rage.

"From you!" He shouted. "You are a delusional psychopath, who took my daughter away from me, and now you are trying to kidnap this little baby girl. You are a sick and evil Russian monster!"

I could not believe what I was hearing. How could Richard think I was kidnapping the child? This was the first time he insulted my country.

I did not believe him, but the more I asked him, the more angry he got and cursed me. Finally, he turned from me and got in his armored plated car. I raised my gun again, but I could not fire the weapon. I could never kill the old man. He was Cynthia's only guardian, and he had insisted that he intended to protect the child. I did not know what to believe, so when Richard started his car's engine and shut the door, I let him drive away.

The baby was still wailing in my arms. Huge teardrop spilled from her large eyes, and I could understand that she was hungry. I quickly placed her in the back of the ambulance and prepared to drive her to the hospital where the anxious mother was waiting. But I heard a groan. One of the guards I had shot was still alive. I noticed dark blood flow from his abdomen. The blood looked almost black, and I knew the bullet had struck his liver. He may live if I took him to the hospital, so I lifted him into the back of the ambulance and rushed to the emergency entry. The nurses whisked the man away to surgery while I carefully carried the baby back to her mother, who was weeping miserably in the pediatric ward. When she saw her child, relief flooded her face and she thanked me for bringing the baby back. I chose not to tell her what had transpired as I knew the truth would terrify her beyond senses.

One I ensured the baby girl was safe, I called my friend who worked at the Bureau and begged him to pull up a file for the Russian woman and her baby, and place two armed guards at the door twenty-four hours a day. My friend said it was impossible to order FBI agents to protect random people without an official order, so I asked him to fill out a form for witness protection which would legally grant him the cause to dispatch law enforcement people to guard the family who was so dear to me.

I left the pediatric ward only after the agents showed up and took positions outside the glass doors of the hospital wing.

When I passed by the exit of the emergency department, one of the surgeons was lounging outside. He recognized me as the ambulance driver who brought the wounded man in, and said I might be relieved to know the man had survived and would likely recover. I sought the surgeon's permission to see the patient and went inside the emergency ward.

I found him lying on his back on a hospital bed, his mouth covered with an oxygen mask. He saw me, and his eyes flickered with recognition but he could not utter a word. I realized the man was conscious but could not speak.

I approached his bed and asked him if he could hear me. He moved his head and gestured for a pen and paper. I handed my small diary and pressed a pencil in his hand. The man began to write vigorously, in large block letters, and I stood beside him reading the sentences. It was surreal!

Richard's wounded guard wrote that the little girl I rescued from them was still in grave danger, as five other special hit teams were hired to kidnap the baby. Richard had given all of them the same instruction: to kidnap the infant and sell her into a transnational child-trafficking ring, and ensure she is raised in brothels to serve international customers from a very young age.

I could not believe this was true. Richard was a harsh man, but he was incapable of even thinking of doing something so utterly vile, certainly not to a little baby.

Why? I mouthed silently, begging the wounded man to explain why Richard gave such an abhorrent command.

The man resumed writing his answers on another blank page and handed it to me. I read slowly, wishing none of what he informed me was true. Richard's security man wrote that the NSA former director wanted revenge on me for breaking his daughter's heart. He told his employees that they had to punish me for dating Cynthia, so they would kidnap and torture the only people who were like a family to me. He targeted the Russian woman who was my neighbor since I arrived in the United States, and he ordered them to kidnap the beautiful woman's only daughter right after birth and keep her as a hostage to make me suffer and pay the price of taking Cynthia away

from him.

"But the child is not related to me. That family was merely my neighbor!" I exclaimed softly to the injured man.

He again scrolled on the blank side of the page, writing that their orders were to make me suffer, and since Russians were known to be sentimental about their loved ones, Richard believed I would be devastated if something happened to the Russian woman or her daughter.

I had many other questions, but the man looked weak and tired. I wiped my cheek which was now wet with tears and left the emergency ward. I knew my Russian origin was being used against me. Richard thought I was weak and emotional and he felt he could hurt me by harming this beautiful and adorable family.

For the next six days, I kept a close watch on the Russian woman's house, making sure the baby girl was safe. I often felt so sleepy that I was afraid someone would slip past me and break into the house. I wanted to stay alert despite the lack of sleep so I bought several packets of stay-awake pills. After eating twenty caffeine tablets in two days, I began to feel the aftereffects of this drug. The stimulating agents in the medicine helped me stay awake but it also caused a number of side effects like heart palpitations, tremors in my hands and feet and high blood pressure. It was becoming too much for my body to bear, but I knew I had to fight to survive and protect this beautiful family and their infant girl. The Russian woman, like myself, had become the target of vicious criminals and I felt it was my duty to protect them.

It seemed that Russophobia now became a vessel for anxieties about social disorders, demographic changes, and fears about impending terrorist violence. These public feelings and government-backed narratives lend themselves to the construction of a sense of embattled nationalism in the United States and in some countries in Europe, where the majority presumes a white male citizen-subject is in need of protection from an ordinary peace-loving Russian. As a result, the construct of the Americanness of people in this country ensures there is a constant barrage of ugly public feelings towards Russians, often in gendered racialized terms. I merely became a common recipient of such curses and criticisms. However, often, these hostile behaviors towards me became unbearable at times. Sometimes I felt like a dying man, who was falling off the peak of a mountain top, or drowning in the middle of the freezing Arctic Ocean. Death would be peaceful, because it would mean my sorrows would end. But how could I die leaving behind this bubbly-eyed infant and her mother in the hands of strangers who were eager to defile and hurt them? Death was sweet, but oh, I could not die! Not yet! Holding this wildly sorrowful thought upon my heart, I cried myself to sleep that night.

The next time it happened, I was in a panic mode.

It had given me a pang to hear the child sob loudly again, and see the tears spring out of her large eyes, and I had a sudden fear seizing me. No child deserved to suffer in the hands of monsters like these men. No, I would rather this baby died than be raised in the chain of international sex traffickers. I held the infant closer to my heart, and wept bitterly, hoping we would both end up dead very soon, before something so terrible happened to her from which she could not recover.

I hated myself for wishing death upon an innocent child, but I could not afford to get killed and leave her in their hands. They would torment and torture her until there would be no semblance of humanity remaining in that tiny human.

I felt an unexplainable anger and hatred for the child. Why was it targeted? Why was this baby girl kidnapped?

Why did I bring a living hell into her world? Why did I ever have to lay my eyes on this family, and spend so much time with the Russian woman and her husband and children? The mother was targeted first, and now the child!

Amidst bursts of tears, I conferred upon myself the heaviest self-reproaches. It was all my fault. Richard had ordered these men to kidnap the girl because their job was to raise her up in a prostitution house and abuse her from childhood, so that she becomes soulless like them.

After the attempted kidnapping of this baby girl, I knew that there was nothing I could do to stop the men who were trying to hurt her. I did not have enough money or friends who were loyal enough not to get bribed or paid by Richard. But I knew there was one person in the world who would be unquestionably loyal to me and the little girl. Cynthia was the love of my life and she would agree to keep the child safe. I also knew that Cynthia was affectionate and sweet, and the baby would be safe with her because Richard would never even think of hurting the baby in she was in Cynthia's lap.

For one whole week, I stayed awake twenty-four hours a day, not even sleeping at night. Every five hours, I swallowed a maximum strength caffeine tablet to stay alert, because I had to watch the Russian woman's house and make sure no one tried to kidnap the baby. After three days without a minute's sleep, my brain began to feel tired. I went to a local pharmacy and purchased several bottles of wake-alertness drugs like dopamine and norepinephrine. The clerk assured me that the wake-promoting agent called solriamfetol would help me stay awake. But it was a federally controlled substance and the pharmacist only agreed to give me one bottle without a doctor's prescription. I downed the entire bottle in one week. However, I was only human and even after taking so many artificial medications,

the drugs became too much for me to bear, and I began to hallucinate and doze off periodically. This frightened me because if I was not alert, then who would look after the child? What if she was kidnapped again?

The next time the Russian woman and her daughter went to a hospital for routine checkup, I took the baby and handed her to Cynthia, warning her not to let Richard or his henchmen to touch the infant. Cynthia assured me the child would be safe with her, so I finally went to my car to take a nap. When I awoke, I heard a helicopter buzzing overhead. It was directly above the hospital! What was a helicopter doing over a children's hospital? I immediately ran inside the hospital and began to race up the stairs frantically. Once I reached the roof, I saw that Richard was dismounting from the helicopter. He was accompanied by twenty armed men, and was smiling at someone who had exited from the elevator. I whipped around in time to see Cynthia walking cheerfully to meet Richard, but there was something in her lap. An infant, wrapped in a thin blanket, was snuggled in Cynthia's arms, and she was eagerly handing the small human over to Richard!

"NO!" I screamed, rushing headfirst into Richard to prevent him from getting near the baby, but it was too late. Cynthia handed the child over to her stepfather and backed away, looking aghast at my fierce expression. I grabbed her arm and asked why she was handing the Russian woman's baby over to Richard. She said Richard promised to take the child and send her to a protective custody under a Witness Protection Agency, so she thought it was a good idea to give the baby girl to him.

I ignored her flimsy explanation and ran after Richard, but he had already boarded the helicopter and was ordering his pilot to fly away. The child was now crying loudly, trying to squirm out of Richard's lap. With a cry, I leaped onto the chopper rails and grabbed the infant, but instead of getting the child, my hands grasped the thin blanket, and I fell to the helipad on the hospital roof.

I again jumped and grabbed the rails of the helicopter, and this prevented the pilot from being able to maneuver the large bird. Richard shouted at me to let go, and when I refused, with a motion of his hands, he ordered his armed guards to shoot me. With bullets whizzing past me, I don't know how I survived, but with tremendous effort, I hauled my whole body inside the helicopter, and stood beside Richard. This time, I snatched the baby from his arms and pushed Richard to the helicopter landing pad. Then I brandished my gun at the pilot and ordered him to fly the baby girl to the police station.

This was one of the deadliest attacks I faced while trying to protect the Russian woman's daughter. That night at the hospital, I thought this was the end to the danger to the infant's life. I honestly thought once the baby grew up to become a woman, she would be safe. No one would target her again, but alas, I was wrong.

I took a train and went to my rented apartment in Fairfax County. Before I could unlock my front door, I heard a faint noise. It was a static of a radio. I saw that the sound came from inside my mailbox, so I opened it and found a receiver. I grabbed it, and a voice addressed me. The man on the radio told me to be at the archives section at the local library in one hour. He claimed to have all the answers to my questions about what happened to Dustin and myself in Russia.

I wanted to tell him I already knew everything about what took place, because Richard, who was the director of NSA's Black Ops division, had told me very clearly, but I was also curious to know who was the real culprit behind the sabotage in the Russian border. So many of my countrymen died right before my eyes, and I wanted to know why their lives were sacrificed.

I agreed to the meeting and arrive at the library and in the archives section, I found a book on the top shelf that had a note glued on the cover. It read "open the book."

I quickly opened the book and found a small syringe hidden inside the pages. Another small scribbled note instructed me to inject myself with the liquid.

I was hesitant. The liquid inside the hypodermic needle could be very dangerous but I was desperate to know the answers. Whatever this chemical was, it couldn't be poison. Why would a man want to meet with me, and tell me to kill myself? If he wanted me dead, he could have shot me in front of my apartment door. I waited a few moments, then closed my eyes, and injected myself with the clear liquid.

Seconds later, I felt very tired and collapsed on the ground.

I woke up inside a sparsely furnished office. A long wooden table was set in the middle and an elderly man was leaning against it. I recognized the man's face, but could not remember his name.

"I've seen you before," I told the man.

When he saw that I was awake, he walked nearer and sat on a chair. "Thank you for coming," he said. "My name is Neil Cooper. I am the director of Cyber and Espionage Operations, and am liaising with the Internal Affairs investigation committee."

"But you are wearing an army uniform," I blurted out.

Neil Cooper nodded. "Yes, that is because until last year, I was the senior authority at the U.S. Central Command Air Forces in Southwest Asia."

"Where are we right now?" I asked Cooper.

The Army commander waved his hand. "Oh, we are at my headquarters at the U.S. Air Force in Arlington, Virginia. Surely, you recognize the landscape?"

"Why the secrecy?" I wanted to know. "You could have met me in a park, or in a normal place."

Neil Cooper sighed. "I needed to be sure you were not followed. There are some things I need to tell you about your employer."

"Richard?"

The Army Commanded nodded his head.

"How long have you known Richard?" I asked.

Commander Cooper frowned slightly. "When I first met Richard, he was already working at the Special Clandestine Service, a highly classified U.S. government black budget program, that was created to combat global terrorism and protect America and its Allies. This was a joint Central Intelligence Agency–National Security Agency program that conducted spying worldwide. Richard was given an autonomous branch that he later turned into his own Black Ops unit at the NSA, a group you have worked for as well."

I was still a little confused, so I said, "Yes, but why did you want to meet with me specifically?"

"Because there are somethings the Army Intelligence department have discovered about Richard. I wanted to ask you if you knew anything about this."

"I had a few recordings of him ordering an assassination, but Richard already explained everything to me. He said he was being coerced into doing that."

"Richard manipulated you, son." Cooper shook his head sadly.

The intelligence official then showed me evidence that proved that Richard had been using his covert Black Ops unit of the NSA to carry out illegal activities, and had been hiring freelance mercenaries who conducted black market trading of weapons, military secrets, industrial intelligence, medical technology, and computer software at his behest. His clients included governments, corporations, wealthy citizens, and even influential families.

I was in shock. I knew Richard did not always follow strict protocol, but I wanted to believe that he was an honest man. How could he talk to me and Cynthia so eloquently and be a criminal?

Neil Cooper seemed to have read my mind. "Your former boss cared only about himself. All he wants is to achieve world domination through control of national governments and the selling of weapons and intelligence for profit and power. That is exactly why he used his old friend Werner to start a war in Russia. He wants to profit from arms sales, and he doesn't care about how many civilians dies."

"If the Pentagon has all these evidence against him, why don't they press charges?" I asked the Commander.

"It is not easy," he explained. "Richard covered his tracks well. He framed his old associates for each of his crimes. For example, everyone in the Department of Defense saw the confession tape of W. H. Buccaneer. The old politician left behind a death note, that detailed how Richard persuaded him to take responsibility for the hijacking of the Soviet nuclear-powered submarine. We already know Richard hired mercenaries to carry out that sabotage in order to expand his influence over the former Soviet Union, and there is paper trail that proves he used his personal bank account to fund those operation, but there is not much we can do. The court will dismiss most of these charges as circumstantial."

"But why don't you at least try to arrest him, temporarily, and if you question him, I am sure he will tell us the truth."

Neil Cooper looked disgusted. "The old sick man is on the run, actually. Lucky for him, because if I got my hands of that mass murderer, I would have destroyed him."

"I had evidence that he was involved in illegal activities," I admitted to the Commander, "but Richard convinced me that he was innocent. He shot one of his friends right in front of me. The man named Buccaneer."

"Yeah, of course he did. To hide evidence, and silence the only witness who could testify against him." Commander Cooper clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "But Richard forgot to put this into the equation."

"What is this?" I pointed at the CD player on his desk.

"A confession video which Buccaneer left before he died." Neil Cooper pressed the play button. "If you watch the whole thing, you will notice that he claims that Richard was his old friend, and begged him to take the fall for some of his crimes, but he knew Richard didn't always play it clean so he kept a backup failsafe, in case Richard ever turned on him, then this would go viral."

“So, the man was innocent?” I gasped. I could still remember the horrific scene when Richard unflinchingly shot that old man in Washington D.C. and in broad daylight.

“I am afraid Richard killed a lot of innocent people in the recent years.” The director of Cyber and Espionage Operations answered. “He pays hundred million dollars each year to a terrorist organization in Lithuania, known as the Beluga Faction. They have been responsible for the bombing of over five churches and shopping malls.”

“Then why don’t the CIA neutralize the members of Richard’s European crime group?”

Neil Cooper answered tersely. “Because we still don’t know who the leaders are. Besides, our echelon interceptor captured some audio that indicates that the Beluga Faction are trying to acquire a new kind of weapon.”

“What sort of weapon are they after?” I asked.

The Army commander looked distressed. “It is a water contaminant of some sort. It can wipe out entire ecosystem. We know this because Richard already acquired a sample of racecadotril drug, but he is planning to use Beluga Faction to purchase the compound in bulk. We are not certain who their targets are but they seem to be planning to use it against the former Soviet Union satellite states.”

“Richard is targeting Russia?” The pitch of my voice increased due to worry.

Neil Cooper laughed humorlessly. “Are you really surprised? Richard is the man who hired his old mercenary friend to enter the Russian Federation illegally last year, and cook up an artificial war against Chechnya, by first attacking Russian troops and pretending that the Chechen fighters were responsible. I also intercepted communiqué that proves that Richard directly threatened the Russian leader of dire consequences if he did not invade Chechnya at once. His orders were clear. To flatten the entire region.”

“Why Chechnya in particular?” I inquired. “What would Richard gain by destroying that region?”

“We are not certain yet, but one particular order was to make sure everyone in the village of Samashki, at the border between Chechnya and Ingushetia, had to be executed.”

“Richard ordered that?” I gasped. I could feel my heart beat racing.

Commander Cooper noticed the panic on my face, and asked if I was okay. “Did that village mean anything special to you?”

“My mother’s family lived there,” I whispered, trying to speak coherently. My throat tightened painfully as I tried to hold back the tears that threatened to spill over my cheek. “My mother’s aunt and cousins lived near that village.”

“It was an odd thing to do,” Neil Cooper said thoughtfully. “That village was of no strategic importance to Richard, yet he wanted to kill every single civilian inside it. Do you think it was related to you?”

I shook my head miserably. “I don’t know. I don’t care anymore why he did it. All my family is dead now. Everyone. Gone. Commander, you must help with the rescue operations in the Russian border. Too many people died already.”

The director of Cyber and Espionage Operations suddenly looked very angry. “These bloody Russian soldiers are responsible for this carnage. They bombed over civilians’ residential areas, and killed thousands of people in Grozny. What kind of savages kill their own people? I am an American military officer, and I can promise you, that no American soldier would ever agree to bomb another state. Can you ever imagine that a Texan pilot would aerial bombard civilian homes in New Jersey or California? No U.S. soldier would ever agree to kill fellow Americans. But those Russians did.”

“Commander, you told me yourself, Richard was responsible for this carnage. He forced the Russian leader to involve the troops.”

“I get that,” Cooper replied impatiently. “But the individual soldiers didn’t have to go around murdering ethnic Russians and Chechens in Grozny. They could have refused to bomb innocent people. Recent estimates suggests that at least thirty thousand civilians were murdered by Russian troops. Monsters.”

“Many soldiers refused to fight, Commander Cooper,” I replied quickly.

“Bullshit!” Cooper snapped. “I always knew the Russians were fucked up people. I just don’t understand why you can still love those psychos.”

“What are you talking about?” I said, alarmed to hear him speak profanely about my countrymen.

“You know what I am talking about,” Cooper said. “Russians are all insane. I mean what kind of people bomb their own people to death. Imagine American air force and marines; they would never have gone ahead to bomb Philadelphia, Nevada or Connecticut. They would never have agreed.”

“No sane person would have agreed to do something like this,” I told the American commander. “But I also know this. Most Russian soldiers didn’t agree with their orders and they refused to fight in Chechnya. A lot of men defected, resigned, and several generals also protested. Some sabotaged their own weapons and vehicles to avoid bombing Chechens and ethnic Russians who lived there. But what can you say? It was all part of Richard’s terrible manipulation.”

“Hey, let me make it clear to you, son. Richard didn’t fly a F16 over Russia to bomb kids. Russian infantrymen did that.”

“True, but I have worked for Richard in the NSA’s Black Ops unit, and I know he can make people do strange things. He can wrap you around his fingers and control you like a puppet. He gains your trust by pretending like he cares about us, and that is how he has so many loyal people to work for him. He owns their souls. He owned mine for ten years. Every time something went wrong in my missions, I would confront him, but he would explain it to me, and even though it sounded suspicious, I still believed him. Or, maybe, I wanted to believe him.” I recalled what Captain Peskov had told me earlier. “A Russian officer told me how most of his men refused to launch a land invasion into Chechnya even after the High Command ordered them to attack.”

“Where did you hear that?” Neil Cooper asked skeptically.

“I know it because it is a fact,” I said, suppressing tears of rage. “Hundreds of soldiers who were sent to the border with instructions to invade Chechnya refused to wage war against their own countrymen, and so they fled from their post, and some of them even sabotaged their own vehicles in order to avoid launching a ground invasion. So, you see, you are wrong to say that Russian soldiers were happy to kill other Russian citizens. No one wanted this twisted war to happen.”

“Maybe some kid soldier felt bad about it, fine, but the Russian commanders had no problem in sending thousands of their troops to the line of fire.”

“But many Russian officers and even generals resigned in protest. They did not want this war either.” I countered immediately. “Look, commander, I know you think all Russians are savages, but that is simply not true. Most Russian citizens were against the entire warfare.”

The director of Cyber and Espionage Operations looked sympathetic, but his words were sharp. “All right, son, I see that you are trying to defend your motherland, and that is great, but Russian military needs to take responsibility for all the war crimes and massacre they carried out in Grozny, because Richard didn’t go there and kill those innocent kids in Chechnya.”

“Look at these cables,” I handed the American intelligence commander a copy of Dustin’s files. “These are records my friend recovered from a secure site in Russia, where one of Richard’s associates were holding us hostage. An entire team of MVD troops that was charged with handling counterinsurgency operations in Grozny had been working directly under Richard’s orders. They were told to bomb indiscriminately. No Russian officer would have ever commanded his men to do that.”

“You may be right,” Neil Cooper finally said. “I guess, right now, we should focus on Richard’s latest mission.”

“Which is?” I asked, already confused about what I had been discussing with him earlier.

“According to our intel, we discovered that Richard is setting a huge reservoir in his base of operations. If we are right, he is planning to use that site to contaminate the water supply of the Russian Federation.”

I shuddered in terror, thinking about what other disasters Richard was planning on Russia. “Where is his base of operation?”

Neil Cooper consulted his map, and replied. “Right now, he is operating from a decommissioned chemical facility north of the Mylinka industrial zone.”

“How did you find out the precise area?” I asked, surprised.

“My code-breaker was able to pinpoint his exact location based on declassified KGB files and some thermal satellite imaging. We had that facility under thermal satellite and our counterintelligence department created an accurate blue print of the site. I bet he planned out this Chechen-Russian war while vacationing in his pathetic hideout there.”

I pressed for information. “What do you know about the details of Richard’s involvement in this war?”

Cooper displayed a list of numbers. “Richard sent his mercenaries, first to Chechnya to start a local uprising, and then he used the chaos as a pretext, and ordered the president of the Russian Federation to bomb every single city in Chechnya, and he hoped that publicly, once the word of the secession of Chechnya spread, it would prompt a domino effect of independence movements within the vast Russian Federation and trigger numerous conflicts. And the winners of this bloodshed would be Richard and his cronies in the illegal arms and drug trade. We have solid proof that he was responsible for the hijacking of the Soviet nuclear-powered submarine in 1989.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked. “Even if you are right, and Richard is guilty of all those things, he is too smart to leave behind such obvious trails.”

“Richard didn’t leave any obvious trails,” the intelligence commander agreed. “But I placed a tap on his home line. He contacted an Eastern European underworld gang leader thirty minutes after the submarine was hijacked, before Kremlin or anyone else even knew about the incident. The call was encrypted but I got a location. A small island on the Persian Gulf. My employees hacked into the hotel’s CCTV and found this.”

Neil Cooper handed me the transcript of a dozen of phone conversations, along with photographs of the speakers, but I did not wish to read them.

"This still doesn't make sense," I told the intelligence commander. "If Richard went through all this trouble to start the Russian war in Grozny, then why did he send Dustin and me to the region?"

"I don't know why he sent you there, kid, but I do know this. After you left the United States, from the moment you touched down in Moscow, you and your friend's life have come under steady attacks. And you probably won't be surprised to hear this, but we have traced almost all phone calls Richard made from his secure line. During the first two weeks, he made a dozen international phone calls. We were not able to identify the person on the other end, because those calls were routed through relay stations, but my engineers did get the destination location. It was in Russia."

"I know," I admitted hesitantly. "Richard told me he had to order those kill hits on me and Dustin, because one of his colleagues held a gun to his head and forced him to do it. He apologized to me."

"And you believed him?" Neil Cooper said incredulously.

"I hoped he was telling the truth," I admitted.

"This would be the second time your old boss is feeding you bullshit. He fought desperately to start the first Gulf War, and then he couldn't wait three years before cooking up another war in Russia, and both times, you buy into his narrative of what happened."

"How can you be so sure that Richard started this war? The fighting was real. The Russian government chose to intervene in Chechnya in order to stop the rebellion."

"There are two questions you need to be asking," the director of Cyber and Espionage Operations told me. "One is who was really behind the alleged rebellion. And secondly, who was responsible for that one particular attack which triggered a ground invasion? When twenty airmen were killed after their base was hit by a rocket. And we now know who was responsible for firing the rocket."

The Intelligence commander used his laser printer to produce two pages of single-spaced digits and corresponding locations. He handed them over to me, explaining how each number contained an eleven-digit bank transfer receipt code, unmistakable evidence of mammoth installments delivered in three phases. Each of the bank transfers were made to separate individuals, their identity anonymized by a secure dark web conference line. He explained how Richard had wired these amounts to several of his underground criminal contacts in Germany, Austria and Lithuania.

"Are all three bank transfers equal in amount?" I questioned.

Neil Cooper consulted the printed sheet before replying. "Two of the transactions are identical. Fifteen million each. The last one was finalized two days ago. Twenty million U.S. dollars."

"Did you find out who received that money?" I asked.

"No, but I figured out a way to make contact with the anonymous men on the other end. They didn't just use the secure line to exchange money, they passed on messages. I can't read all the scrambled sentences, obviously, but our data-collection monitor flagged several high-resolution images. The NSA black ops chief sent messages to the three men. And two passport-sized picture images. Recognize them?"

I took in a sharp breath as I saw the sheet of paper. There was a color photo of Dustin and a headshot of myself in the file. A small note below the picture mentioned that both targets must be debriefed and eliminated. These were classic terms intelligence operatives used to mean torture and execution. It was very painful to imagine that Richard would give his men orders to kill and torture Dustin and myself. I had trusted and even liked Richard, and sometimes, considered him to be almost a father figure, but all the past emotions were dying away in my heart. I could only think of one thing: how could he have ordered Russian troops to bombard the villages adjacent to Grozny? Why did those thousands of civilians have to die? It was so cruel of the world to snatch away all my relatives from me. Wasn't it enough that I had lost my mother? No, but the pain was building upon more pain, and that holy ground upon which I had buried her remains were now reduced to burning rubble. My mother's family graveyard in Grozny had also been reduced to a heap of smokes and crumbling stone. My grandparent's resting place was also desecrated and all their descendants were gone. For a moment, I was sad that the assassins who had tried to kill me could not succeed. Had I been dead, I would not have to suffer this terrible sadness in my heart, and I would not have to see all my family members burning to death in the aerial bombardments. All the lives lost in a useless war, a battle financed and ordered by the corrupt director of NSA's Black Ops division. What a loss! I never realized before- that the world could be so cruel to someone.

I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I almost forgot that Neil Cooper was standing in front of me. He was speaking again. "Giving images of a person is the classic method for anonymous assassination, where neither the hirer or the would-be-assassin ever gets to know each other. I think these huge sums of money Richard sent to his hitmen was for disposing of a specific target: you and your hacker friend."

After months of fighting, much like the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the first Chechen war also ended in a stalemate, because Russia agreed to pull its troops out after signing a peace accord that allowed people in the Chechen region to self-rule themselves.

But the damage had been done. Richard did not ultimately succeed in his plans, but because of this war, thousands of people on both sides suffered. All this news shocked me greatly, and I knew that Richard's political and intelligence circle was beginning to resemble the myth of Icarus, a minor character in Greek Mythology, who plunged to earth after ignoring warnings that his waxen wings would melt if he flew too close to the sun. Richard seemed to have gone too far with his criminal activities.

Neil Cooper was playing a video on the projector screen on his wall. I glanced briefly at it, and noticed that it was the confession video of W. H. Buccaneer.

I had seen Richard execute him in public, so this video disturbed me greatly. I asked Cooper why he was replaying the tape.

"I am trying to show you how deluded you were," Cooper told me. "Richard have been playing you all along."

"I know this already," I said impatiently. "Richard framed Buccaneer for his own crimes, but it is too late to change that because that man is dead. What I don't understand is why you are showing me this now, when that person was killed in Washington four years ago?"

"You want to know the truth? An unnamed Pentagon official received and shared a copy of the confession video of this old man, and since then, we have been tapping Richard's phone and been keeping a close eye on him. However, we couldn't use this video in court as evidence against him, because Buccaneer admits he was Richard's close friend and had volunteered to take the fall for him, but he also mentions that he knows Richard very well. He knew Richard often kills the people whom he uses to gain something, so in case he died, this video tape would automatically be sent to Pentagon's Archival Department."

"So, the CIA had no idea?" I asked.

Cooper hesitated. "Yes and no. In the confession video, he said Richard asked him to take the blame for the *USS Roosevelt* sabotage and attack, but eventually, he knew he might be killed, so he arranged to keep the original paper trail and evidences in a folder and mail it to Langley's main office in case he died. Due to the sensitive nature of the material, the CIA kept the file classified, and fired most of the employees who were involved in declassifying the information."

"What do you know about the other man who Richard told me about?"

Neil Cooper looked puzzled for a moment. "Oh, yes, the colleague of his who apparently held a gun to Richard's head and ordered him to execute you? That is Clarence Hill."

"You know him?"

Cooper nodded. "Yes, we all do. Clarence Hill was the Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency and this week, he turned himself over to the Maryland Police Department and confessed to being responsible for starting the Chechen war."

"Which prison is he being held in right now?" I asked.

The director of Cyber and Espionage Operations looked alarmed. "Why do you ask? That is a classified information. The Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency is high priority prisoner and is being held in a secure facility awaiting trial."

"Look, Commander, I respect that, but I really need to meet him personally. I need to ask Clarence Hill why he did it. And why he blackmailed Richard. I need to find out the truth."

Cooper sighed heavily. "Well, I will make a phone call to the federal penitentiary and see if they can grant you a visitor's pass." He walked me to his office door. "Check your mailbox by tomorrow morning and if the prison warden approves my request, you will find your pass in there."

I thanked the man and left the granite building.

By noon the next day, I was waiting at the prison gates, as the security guards verified my identity papers. It was all in order and I was allowed to enter the heavily fortified windowless concrete building.

When I sat in the visiting across Clarence Hill, I thought he looked very frail. The former Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency looked surprised to see me.

"Young man, do I know you?" Hill asked me in a croaky voice.

"No, but I used to work for Richard," I told him.

"Did Richard send you?" The old man said, suddenly looking around the visiting space.

I raised my hand to calm his fears, and then told him about everything that happened in Chechnya and Russia's border. I described the war that had just taken place and then I finally confronted him with the information Richard had confided in me.

"Richard said you put a gun to his head and forced him to order my assassination?"

Before I could finish my question, the old man nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes, I did everything. Please believe me, I am responsible for all those crimes."

"What about the assassination of the Russian ambassador?" I said. "Did you order it too?"

Clarence Hill nodded again. "Yes, of course I did. Richard had nothing to do with the assassination. I personally wanted that bastard dead, so I had him killed."

I scoffed openly. "Mr. Hill, now I can see that you are lying. I only asked you this to test you. There was no assassination attempts on the Russian diplomat. But you are desperate to admit to all kinds of crimes. Why are you doing this?"

The former Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency didn't reply.

"Are you afraid of Richard? Is that why you are protecting him?" I asked again.

Again, Clarence Hill did not answer my question. I waited for a moment, then I placed a small portable CD player on the desk, and played the confession tape of W. H. Buccaneer, the man who had taken responsibility for Richard's crime before the Gulf War broke out. I also told the prisoner how Richard executed him in broad daylight, because he feared Buccaneer could become a liability.

After I played the entire confession tape, I begged him to tell me the truth. "The man you are seeing in this video is W. H. Buccaneer. He was a politician living in Washington D.C. and like you, he was also Richard's friend. And you know what, after Buccaneer outlived his usefulness, Richard shot him dead right in front of me. That is how he deals with people who does favors for him. I know you are a good man, Mr. Hill. You would never try to kill thousands of innocent civilians."

"Thousands of civilians?" Clarence Hill repeated. "Dead?"

I told him how tens of thousands of civilians perished in Chechnyan cities and villages and how thousands of children had died in the air raids that spanned over one year. "Richard said you were responsible for the entire scenario, and he told me you started this war. That isn't true, is it?"

The former Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency took a deep breath. "I agreed to take the blame for all this because Richard assured me that innocent people would not die. He said he only wanted to make some financial profits by starting a war in Russia."

I was confused. "How would Richard gain financially?"

"Aside from accelerated weapons sale, Richard said he was told by several Sberbank currency analysts that the value of ruble would fall in the event of a war, and he and his business partners would capitalize on the disaster and profit from the bloodshed. The way he planned it, Richard would persuade the US Senate to place restrictions on Russia's sovereign debt, because it would then trigger a multibillion dollar sell-off of Russian bonds and increase borrowing costs for the Kremlin. This would liquidate Russian economy and put money in Richard's pocket."

"So, he asked you to claim responsibility for all the crimes he committed. Why did you agree?"

"I agreed to this because he convinced me that it was important for him to stay in his official government position. I thought Richard could do a lot of good in the world if he was the director of NSA's black ops unit. His talents could have benefited our country."

"You were deceived," I commented. "Richard was causing deadly wars in various parts of the world. And like he did last time, Richard merely persuaded one of his trusted co-workers to take the blame for the crimes he committed. We need to stop him. With your help, we can."

"What can I do?" Clarence Hill asked.

"You can testify against him in court. Tell the jury how he forced you to take the blame for his crimes."

"My life will be in danger," Clarence Hill protested. "If I go against him, he will destroy my life."

"This is your chance of doing the right thing," I pleaded with the old man.

"Okay, I will do this, but only on one condition," the former Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency said slowly. "You will have to arrange for a full pardon, commuting of my sentence, and provide me with a witness protection. Then I will testify in court and tell them how Richard ordered those assassinations and hired mercenaries to attack Russian military installations."

After I secured a promise from Clarence Hill, I drove out of the prison ground, relieved that someone had been brave enough to speak the truth. Two hours later, I got a phone call from my friend Dustin. He called to tell me that Clarence Hill was dead.

The man I met only hours ago was found dead in his cell block, and prison medical staff suggested that it was a suicide. I suspected something was suspicious about this, because why would he mysteriously die moments after agreeing to testify against Richard. So, I asked Dustin to check the prison visiting logs to check who else came to see Clarence Hill. The Russian hacker contacted me a few minutes later and said immediately after I had left the prison complex, the former Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency had a new visitor: his estranged brother from Arkansas.

I was mildly surprised to hear that. Why would the old man's brother want to kill him?

I then asked Dustin to check all the CCTV camera footages around the penitentiary, but the hacker complained that the all of the camera recordings were wiped clean during the time of the visit. This was highly unusual. I couldn't imagine who had the kind of

authority to erase the surveillance footages of an entire prison complex, but as I was scouring the area, I noticed a hardware store two avenue blocks across the prison entrance. A small manual camera was fitted in to exterior lawn.

I retrieved the video spool and recovered the camera images. It showed a man with a long coat and small briefcase, entering the prison grounds, minutes after I had left. Before passing the prison gates, the man momentarily turned his head.

I froze when I saw his face. It was Richard!

Thousands of questions raced through my mind.

What was he doing in this prison? Had he been following me?

Now that I knew Richard had been at the federal penitentiary, I took an old file photo of him and interrogated the prison guards. They confirmed that this man had come to visit Clarence Hill after I left, and the next time they checked on him, the former Deputy Director of the Defense Security Agency was dead.

My heart was broken at this loss, because I could not protect that old man. He had been terrified of the idea of testifying against Richard, and now he was dead. I did not have any more solid evidence tying Richard to all those violent crimes he had carried out over the years. It was shocking to see that Richard was desperate enough to kill his own friend in prison to prevent him from testifying in court.

PRESENT DAY

Admiral Baldassarre Bastico was born in Italy, but he lived in America and spoke fluent English, and after joining the United States Military, Bastico pretended to be an American and he and his German friend worked together to carry out massive attacks and bombing of Chinese troops that were stationed in the sea water near Taiwan. My friend Dustin, who was a computer engineer, found out that Bastico and the German criminal hired twenty specially trained mercenaries and killers from Germany and Netherlands, and they blew up a Chinese submarine that was patrolling Chinese sea waters. One of the main persons who personally planned and carried out all the bombing and other attacks was the Italian born soldier, whose name was Baldassarre Bastico. He came to America as a teenager and learned the English language very well. Bastico also worked for Richard and did all the terrible crimes for him in exchange of money. Even though Bastico was an Italian citizen, Richard helped him forge papers and pretend to be American, and the Italian man was finally able to join the United States Military. He rose in ranks very quickly and killed anyone who tried to stop him. After blowing up the Chinese submarine, there was an international uproar over it, because China lost around twenty high-ranking officers who were in the submarine. The demanded an explanation about who could have done such a terrible act. The Italian Admiral immediately ordered the CIA director to call the Chinese senior leaders and tell them that Russian officers were responsible for the attacks. But the CIA chief refused to lie, because he knew that Russia had nothing to do with it. He told Admiral Bastico that he won't lie to the Chinese and falsely blame Russians. The Italian man was very angry at the CIA director and he kidnapped the CIA director's daughter and promised to kill her if he did not lie to the Chinese and tell them that Russian special forces carried out the bombing of the Chinese submarine. The director of the American Central Intelligence Agency became very worried and he contacted the Chinese government officially, and told them that the United States government had information that Saudi Arabian special forces bombed your submarine. The Chinese forces trusted and believed the American spy agencies, so they immediately began to kidnap and torture all the Russian visitors who were in China. The Communist Police in China also kidnapped and began to torture all the tourists who had come to visit Beijing or Shanghai. After this incident, hundreds of Russian men and their innocent family members were taken into Chinese secret prisons to be tortured and questioned.

When I found out that the director of the Central Intelligence Agency was forced to give false information to the Chinese government which led them to kidnap and torture Russian men, I met with several senior Chinese politicians and gave them evidence that the Russian men were innocent. At first, the Chinese government officials did not believe me. They promised to retaliate on Russia and said they would soon detonate real nuclear bombs over Moscow. I was so scared, and I cried and begged with them not to bomb those Russian cities. I did not want a nuclear bomb to explode over the luxurious city of Moscow. I also asked Dustin to give me satellite images which proved that the Italian man and his German friends blew up the Chinese submarine. When the Chinese officers saw the pictures, they finally believed me, and they agreed not to bomb Russia.

But after the Italian man found out that I managed to thwart his plans of destroying Russia, he decided to try a new mission. This time, he and his German friends decided to target the Saudi and Emirati Royal families. They tried to commit petty crimes and frame the princes of those countries for it.

I knew that Richard hated me, but he was only eager to hurt me, so that I stopped my relationship with his step daughter. However, the Italian and his German assistant were different. They only wanted to kill as many Muslims as they could. I also knew that Richard trusted Bastico and delegated many tasks to him. However, it was one of Bastico's favorite games that he tried to frame every single

crime on innocent Arab Muslims. Since he was Italian, he hated all Arabs very much. He used to tell his colleagues in the NSA, that he wanted to kill and torture all the Muslims on this world. So, I was not surprised when he murdered a Saudi Arabian journalist, and told the media that the Saudi Crown Prince was responsible for the killing.

I found out all about this killing scandal after my dear friend Dustin hacked in several sealed Turkish government files, and saw some mention of a criminal investigation. All the uproar began in the aftermath of the death of Gamal Kashoga, a US-based journalist who was killed after entering the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul. The Saudi government claimed they know nothing about the incident, but a low-level clerk told the media that the journalist died while resisting arrest. Kashoga's killing sparked international diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and many European countries, including France, Canada, Germany, Finland and Denmark all of who levied sanctions against high-ranking Saudis who were responsible for the coverup. Several officials inside the Central Intelligence Agency worked for the Italian man and they quickly accused the young Saudi prince Mohamed, of ordering the assassination of Gamal Kashoga, but since it was a false accusation, they could not provide any evidence to support it. Turkey was understandably enraged by this breach of diplomatic protocol.

I also secured a copy of the hard drive in the Italian man's files and it showed that he was planning to carry out many other crimes in Turkey. I saw the blue print that described a plan to blow up the Saudi consulate in Istanbul and frame a retired Maroon Beret Turkish soldier for starting the explosion.

I knew the maroon berets were members of *Özel Kuvvetler Komutanlığı*, the Spec Ops unit of the Turkish Armed forces who generally carry out covert operations and gather intelligence. But the planned bombing on the Saudi consulate didn't take place because *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, the state intelligence agency intercepted several cables and thwarted the plot. The Turkish government, however, was infuriated over the journalist's killing and ordered the *MİT* to conduct a separate investigation. Their inquiry produced an unusual result. The undersecretary of *MİT* announced that preliminary studies showed the killing of the Saudi-born journalist on Turkish soil was a hoax. They scoured through every single camera within miles and interviewed over two hundred witnesses. No one saw any bodies. Of course, a handful of Interpol and CIA gave a very different version of the alleged killing, claiming that the journalist was sawed to death, then transported to the Saudi ambassador's personal home to be burned in his cooking over. Those people who said the journalist was murdered were all paid hefty sum of money by the Italian man, and were ordered to lie to the reported in American and Britain. According to fake CIA reports, twelve Saudi agents cut Kashoga's body into small pieces and burned them inside the ambassador's kitchen, within a span of three days, and they also roasted several goats in the oven to cover up their crime. But *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı* claimed that the CCTV camera which showed the journalist entering the consulate was a doctored and fake image. He never was at the embassy. And the twelve staff members who the CIA said were taking parts of his dismembered body into the ambassador's house were actually delivering groceries to the diplomat's quarters. There was no body. There were no journalists in the Saudi Embassy at all, but the world media continued to blame the Saudi Arabian prince for the crime, even though he was absolutely innocent of these crimes.

I wondered why the Interpol and CIA came up with such a grisly narrative and lied about the Saudi crown prince, when he was an innocent man who never killed anyone. But I soon realized that those Interpol and CIA agents were either paid or threatened by the Italian man and his German friend.

I asked Dustin about the alleged fiancée of the journalist. After investigating the bank and phone records of the woman, Dustin found evidence that showed the fiancée of the dead journalist was also an agent who worked for the Italian mafia man, and she was being paid one million dollars each day to lie about the murder of her journalist boyfriend.

The Italian man supplied some officers in the CIA with faulty intel into making them believe a grotesque crime had indeed taken place in the Saudi Consulate in Turkey. But I should have known. From the first time I heard of the murder, nothing seemed to add up. A wealthy kingdom like KSA has no need to carry out such a pedestrian act like sawing a journalist to death in full view of surveillance cameras. It was too movie-like. The media was making it too dramatic and the international attention it garnered was phenomenal. And most interestingly, the repeated interview given by the fiancée of the Saudi journalist sounded a little bit suspicious to me. I finally met her personally and confronted her. I also showed the woman all the phone records which showed how she was in constant audio contact with the Italian-born admiral Baldassarre Bastico. She broke down in tears and admitted that the Admiral met with her several times, and the two bonded and even had a brief romantic affair. Baldassarre Bastico convinced her to have an affair with the Saudi journalist Kashoga, and become engaged to him. The next part of their plan was for her to play along with the Italian man in the fake story where her fiancé allegedly gets killed by the Saudi Crown prince. Her only job was to cry on television and give interviews at regular intervals and tell the world media that her journalist boyfriend was killed by the dangerous crown prince of Saudi Arabia.

After hearing her confessions, I was convinced that the Saudi crown prince was innocent, so I returned to the United States, and called Dustin again. This time, I was trying to solve the last part of this puzzle that was bothering me. One of the things I did not understand was why the Italian-born admiral was so eager to blame this journalist's murder on the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. Why didn't Baldassarre Bastico frame an Emirati prince or a royal family member of the Qatari or Kuwaiti ruling class. However, Dustin had an explanation for me.

"I just remembered something from our briefing at the United States Senate Investigation Committee when they were sharing their bi-monthly report with us," the Russian hacker told me. "Do you remember the report? It was seven hours long. Almost everything they had found about the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center."

"Yes, I was the one taking notes," I recalled. "Senator Barney mentioned how two CIA officers anonymously leaked tapes of the interrogation of a terror suspect, who was obviously found to be innocent."

Dustin sounded eager to continue. "The you remember that the Committee was running a parallel investigation into the death of three Saudi princes. Within the span of four months, Prince Sultan bin Faisal bin Turki al-Saud and Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Saud al-Kabir and Prince Ahmed, who was the older brother of Prince Mohamed, died in Saudi Arabia."

"Did the senators find out the cause of their death?" I inquired.

"It was still under investigation," Dustin told me. "But the 9/11 senate investigative committee found reasons to believe that those deaths were carefully planned murders. And the Department of Homeland Security actually believed that Baldassarre Bastico was personally responsible for those murders."

"That Italian man killed three princes in Saudi Arabia? Why?"

"Because those member of the Royal Family of KSA were discovering the truth about September 11 attacks on New York. They almost found out that the Italian Admiral was behind the explosion in both Towers of the WTC buildings."

I nodded to myself. "I remember the circumstances of those princes death."

"It was very suspicious." The Russian hacker agreed with me. "Prince Ahmad was only 43 years when he suffered a sudden heart attack. His cousin, Prince Sultan bin Faisal, who was 41, reportedly died in a single-car accident while driving to Prince Ahmad's funeral. The mystery didn't end there. A week later, Prince Fahd bin Turki, who was 21, apparently died due to intense thirst. When we talked to them, one of the senators expressed concerns that Mohamed might have found out about his brother Ahmad's murder and could be planning an elaborate revenge on the Italian-born Admiral."

I recalled slowly. "The people who killed those three princes might have placed Prince Mohamed in their list. That would make sense why he was being framed in the journalist's murder in Turkey. Mohamed's brother, Prince Ahmad, was no ordinary royalty. He was head of Saudi Intelligence. Senator Stalinski suspected that the three princes would have been viable witnesses in the World Trade Center investigations had they not been silenced prematurely."

Dustin looked fascinated. "If the Italian admiral was responsible for staging the accidents for the three Saudi princes and also framed Mohamed Salman for the murder of the journalist in Turkey, then we already he is the main culprit behind all of this." The Russian hacker beamed at his own hypothesis.

"Prince Ahmad was killed because he allegedly possessed evidence that proved Saudi Arabian citizens were not involved in the attacks on the Pentagon or the World Trade Centers," I reminded Dustin. "He had proof that the alleged hijackers who died in that plane were alive and living in Saudi Arabia. But targeting Mohamed is different. This time, Baldassarre Bastico is after something else."

"So, do you think it was all about money then? Dead journalist. Frantic diplomats. Rushed arms sales."

"Maybe," I admitted. "War business. It is the most profitable trade in this century. I still remember how the Italian man tried to start a conflict between the Russian Federation and the United Arab Emirates."

Dustin looked taken aback. The code-breaker hastily produced another page of transcript and turned it to face me. "From skimming these paragraphs, I am deducing that the impending war Bastico planned is contingent on framing Emirati ruling class successfully. Apparently, several diplomats and entrepreneurs are listed in this file. They are scheduled to be killed in a counteroffensive operation. Irkut Company is a Russian weapons manufacturer, headquartered in the Northern Administrative Okrug. They planned to use explosives produced from that company and detonate it over FNC Parliament Complex in Abu Dhabi. And forensics examining the residue will think it was an act of war, sanctioned by the Russian government."

I pointed to a location on the e-map. "There is also a retaliatory attack listed here. It is the Komsomolsk Mechanical Plant which is incidentally based in the Russian Far East, and is listed here as a potential target of the ERO initiated attack."

"Why would Admiral Baldassarre Bastico want to attack that particular plant?"

"The Plant happens to be the second largest aircraft-manufacturing company in the Eurasian continent. It could be part of the plan. To destabilize weapons defense system of Russia as they show the Russians that the UAE government is attacking it. Another

Russian state-owned tech company credited with the production of high-tech electrooptical equipment, laser systems, target finders and photolithographic systems has allegedly been infiltrated by sleeper ERO agents.”

“This means whoever is planning this massive frame job already got their tentacles inside the wolf’s lair. We know that the Italian man has eyes and ears in every tier of the Russian government.”

I tried to calm the Russian hacker and assured him. “We’ll notify Emirati authorities. What else can you find out about the supposed targets?”

“Seventeen intelligence operatives and cyber warfare specialists are scheduled to arrive in Sharjah next week.” Dustin read from a report. “They are part of the team who are formulating UAE’s intelligence apparatus.”

“Where is the meeting supposed to take place?”

“The meeting is scheduled to take place in the eleventh story of NESA’s headquarters.”

“Okay,” I said. “I will head there right now and alert the Russian and Emirati authorities that the same Italian man who is a member of the mafia, is now trying to start a war between Russia and the United Arab Emirates. Hopefully, if they know the Baldassarre Bastico’s plans, they can stop him in time, and prevent him from detonating a nuclear bomb over Dubai city center.”

I knew the Italian man and his German friends were planning to start a civil war in Middle East and wanted to destroy the royal family of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and Qatar and Oman and Bahrain. They wanted to make those oil rich nations become dilapidated like Iraq and Syria.

However, I was lucky to be able to prevent Russia being framed by that Italian man. The Emirati authorities contacted their Russian counterparts and were able to prevent the bombs from detonating. However, I was still worried about terrorist group known as ISIS which was still active in many cities of the world.

I wanted to find out the latest updates about this terrorist group, so I contacted my friend Andrei, who was an employee of the SVR.

I asked him about the ISIS group in Syria and Iraq, and wanted to know if the German man made the terrorist group ISIS in the gulf region.

"Yes, but he did not make it alone," Andrei replied. "The German man and his Italian friend worked together, and hired hundreds of criminals to dress in black ISIS uniforms and commit lots of crimes. Then, they videotaped those crimes, like burning children, and beheading women in front of camera."

I asked. "But I saw those ISIS propaganda videos. The people who were speaking in those videos all spoke in Arabic. If they were Italian or German, how did those men speak Arabic?"

"The Italian navy officer hired sixty-five Israeli Mossad agents who speak Arabic fluently. We interviewed several of those Mossad agents, and we know that they each received fifty million American dollars in return for making videos in Arabic, where they claim that Alla told them to kill and rape all the people in Syria, Tukey and Iraq. Those Israeli agents were fluent in Arabic, because they live with their Palestinian neighbors, so they were able to make convincing videos showing how ISIS fighters beheaded Egyptian priests."

"Was there a specific reason why the Mossad agents killed those Egyptian priests?"

"Yes, the Italian army commander wanted to start a civil war between the Egyptian Muslims and the Egyptian Christians, so he made a fake video, showing how ISIS fighter beheaded Christian priests, and recorded the crime on video."

"Why is the Italian man so interested in starting civil wars in the Middle East?" I asked Andrei.

"He wants to destroy all Muslims, and especially Arabs, because when he fought in the Iraq War, he tortured and murdered many civilians, and was punished in Iraqi courts. Now, he wants the whole world to think that Muslims are worse than him." Andrei said. "He not only killed those Egyptian priests, he also overthrew the president of Egypt, so that the nation could fall into chaos and another civil war. The Italian man wants all the Middle Eastern nations to become like Iraq, and then he is hoping to make more groups like ISIS and do a lot of violence and blame all of it on Muslims."

"Were you able to confirm who all the ISIS terrorists were?" I asked my Russian friend.

"Almost all of the leaders of the ISIS Dawla group were Israeli Jews and Christian Arabs, and some were apostates, who had voluntarily left Islam, but we also found many paid actors who were given millions of dollars to give fake interviews and act in shows like the ISIS slavery videos."

"I see. But why did he make ISIS do all the bloodshed and killings in Syria? I thought you mentioned he fought as an American soldier in Iraq."

Andrei nodded. "Yes, the Italian-American man, Baldassarre Bastico, was fighting in Iraq, when he and his German friend created the ISIS group and started to blow up lots of oil refinery and depots. Eventually, some of the Syrian Intelligence officers including members of the Mukhabarat found out that the German man was behind all the ISIS bombings, so they briefly arrested the two men and interrogated them. The Italian man was tortured by the Syrian Secret Police force, so after he escaped, he planned to kill the Syrian

leader, and then turn his whole country in to nameless and lawless region. Ever since the Syrian Mukhabarat arrested the German man and his Italian friend, they have been taking revenge on them by making fake ISIS videos where they torture and kill innocent Muslim children on video and pretend that they are Arabs. The ISIS leaders claim to rape and torture Muslim women and announce that their Alla told them to do so."

"Why are they doing this?"

"The Italian-American man, Baldassarre Bastico, and his German friends are trying to frame all their criminal activities on the innocent Muslim men in the Gulf Nations and in the Middle East. This was one of the reasons why the Italian man's group tried to blow up the United Arab Emirates Parliament Building Complex."

I asked hurriedly. "Were these European mercenaries trying to kill all of the parliament members in UAE?"

"They were certainly planning to do that, but most importantly, these people tried to make the attack on the Parliament Building look like it was done by the Russians." Andrei said.

"The Russians?" I repeated.

"Yes, the Italian-American man, Baldassarre Bastico's group never does anything without blaming it on someone else. This time, they planned to attack Gulf countries and make it look as if Russia was behind this. They want the Arab nations to hate Russians and declare war with them."

"Why does the Italian army commander want Arabs to hate Russia?"

"Recently, Russian businessmen have been doing lots of financial transactions with the government of the UAE. Their relationship has improved significantly in recent years, so this criminal group wants to destroy it by blowing up palaces and parliament buildings in the Gulf region and frame Russians for it." The SVR officer paused. "Right now, this Italian man is targeting Afghanistan, and want to use that country to carry out all his bombings. The FSB, FAPSI, and the SVR has evidence that the leaders of this new Taliban group were all mercenaries working for the Italian army officer. Some of them are ex-Moslems who converted to Christianity, and tortured Moslem Afghans for many years. The Italian man ordered his agents and mercenaries in Afghanistan to start something like the ISIS and begin a sex-slavery and love jihad using the Taliban image as a front. People are going to think that they are Taliban members, but the men posing as Afghans are CIA and BND agents, framing Afghans for various crimes. They are all working for this Italian man."

I asked my friend. "How did this Italian man get so powerful?"

"He had a romantic affair with the American president's daughter." Andrei confided to me.

"The young blonde woman?" I asked.

"Yes, the president's daughter was smitten by his charms, and was about to divorce her husband and marry her. But she later found out his true plans, and broke up with her."

"What plan did the president's daughter find out?" I wanted to know.

"She found evidence that the Italian man was having this affair with her to get close to the president, and murder him, in order to become the president himself. After she broke up with him, the Italian man took revenge on her, and almost stole a billion dollar from her clothing brand. He later tried to destroy her father's career, and hired expensive lawyers to file cases against the president and threatened several Supreme Court Justices to approve the impeachment charges against the American president."

"He sounds very dangerous," I commented.

"He is a dangerous man, who has connections with almost all the senior government officials, and now his full-time agenda is to make the Taliban look worse than the fake ISIS group in Iraq, and Syria. That is one of the reasons why he is publicizing videos that shows Taliban fighters taking over government buildings in Kabul. And soon, he will make them announce mandatory sex slavery, public flogging and beheading."

"Is he also hired by Richard to assault and attack my sister?"

"We do not have any confirmation of that in particular, but we know that he hates Moslems, and he also hates Russians very much."

I asked Andrei. "How do you know he hates Russian people?"

"He was responsible for several cyber-attacks on American government websites, and he framed Russian hackers for it. He has been attacking many people and blaming it all on certain world leaders."

"Which world leaders?" I asked.

Andrei replied. "This Italian-American officer is very strong willed and he freely threatens any leader who does not listen to him. When someone refuses to obey his command, like the Saudi king or the Russian prime minister, he immediately frames them for crimes."

"How does he do that? It is not easy to frame the president of a powerful nation like Russia."

"You are right. What this Italian man does is he assassinates all the journalists or political activists who speak against the Russian president, or the Saudi king, and he makes it look like those leaders ordered the hit on them."

"How?"

"For example, he recently killed a journalist, who used to criticize the Saudi king, and he framed the king for it, and doctored false camera images, and hired fake people to say that he ordered them to kill the journalist. In order to make it sound credible, he paid one of his best female agents and asked her to have an affair with the journalist, and become his fiancée, and now he orders her to give interviews and statements claiming that the Saudi king killed her boyfriend."

"You said he tried to kill Russian politicians, as well?"

"Yes, he also killed or at least attempted to poison and murder several of the Russian prime minister's outspoken critics, and he wants the world media to think that the Russian leader ordered the hit."

"Why does he do this?"

"His agenda is to make Moslems and Russian people to be roundly excoriated in the United States and to be portrayed as demons and savages deserving of death." Andrei explained. "Right now, this Italian mafia man is sending hundreds of armed men to Afghanistan and ordering them to dress in traditional tunics and make videos, announcing that they are Taliban religious fighters."

"Are you saying the people who are taking over Kabul, and all other Afghan cities are actually mercenaries trained by this Italian-American man?" I whispered.

"Yes, he ordered his agents to pose as Taliban fighters and carry out military offensives in the country so that everyone thinks that the Taliban are back, and that they are dangerous. All these attack from these European mercenaries caused the American forces to withdraw so hastily from Afghanistan. His fake fighters now got the chance to occupy territories after territories. He also hired a handful of Afghan villagers who are ex-Muslims, and they are ordered to pose with machine guns, supplied by him."

"Why is he going to such lengths to frame Afghans for petty crimes?"

"Well. For many years, this Italian man and his German friend had been hiring independent contractors to give mass shootings inside the United States. He was responsible for over fifty massive shooting in schools, restaurants, and shopping malls."

"Why did he give those shooting inside America?"

"He wanted to become the president of the United States, so he thought is he hired a lot of criminals to give a lot of shooting, the government will declare itself unable to handle such crisis and the president will be forced to resign."

"So what if the president resigns?"

"This Italian military officer wants to become the next president after forcing this current president out of office."

"But it is not so easy to become president. There is the Supreme Court which decides on who should be the next leader."

"He knows that. For over two years, he has been trying to black mail Supreme Court Justices and warned them not to even try to stop him from becoming president. He is that desperate to become the leader of this country."

"And now, in Afghanistan?" I asked. "All the Taliban fighters are actually members of Lethal Unit?"

"All the Taliban are his agents. They are not Patan or Pashtun. Almost all of them are drug lords, and war lords who receive generous amount of money from the Italian admiral. He ordered his fake Taliban members to rape and mutilate civilians, so that everyone hates them." Andrei said, giving me several other details of the new mercenary regime in Central Asia.

He told me about how the Italian army officer worked closely with his employer, a German-Austrian man named Richard. I knew he was talking about Cynthia's stepfather.

Andrei also told me that the Italian man hated the Mukhabarat.

"What is the Mukhabarat?" I asked him.

"It is the Syrian Intelligence agency. They caught him when he was framing Iraqi and Syrian citizens for his fake bombings, so they had him arrested and kept him in an interrogation cell in Damascus. After he was questioned, they released him, but he was very angry, and began to frame Syrians, and later, Russians for all the bomb explosions in the area."

"Why didn't the Syrian Mukhabarat hand the Italian man over to the CIA?"

Andrei looked surprised. "Of course, they did. The CIA arrested him twice already, and placed him in a black site. But he hired his undercover agents to kidnap and torture the children of the FBI and CIA director, and then he always goes to save them. They think he is a hero who saved their children, but this is a trick he always plays."

"What happened after the CIA took him?"

"All I know is what I read in the SVR bulletin recently. The CIA interrogated him and he claimed that he was innocent and was framed. But the IRS found out he had almost fifty billion dollars."

"Where did he get that kind of money?"

"We think that Richard gave him the money. This Italian-American naval commander is now using this money to frame Yemen and bomb Saudi Arabia. He uses drones from Saudi Arabian airspace, and uses it to pound over Yemen, thus effectively keeping a war going on."

"Does the SVR know why this Italian man targeted Saudi Arabia?"

"Yes. He wants to control the Saudi government and every time, the Saudi government refuses to listen to him, he detonates a bomb over Riyadh palaces or sends missiles from Yemen. We also heard about how he threatened a wealthy Saudi Arabian prince, and when he refused to listen to him, his European mercenaries tried to kidnap and torture his wife. She was a very famous and wealthy philosopher. The princess was very shaken, and left her husband to hide from the criminals."

"But what else do you know about his plans to nuke the capital of the United States?" I asked.

"We know that he does not care about America at all. His plan is to use nuclear weapons on the U.S. cities and frame Taliban for it."

"But no one will believe him?" I suggested.

"The Italian man covered his tracks well. For the past five years, he plants hundreds of bombs in many places in America, and then goes to the Senate Intelligence Committee, and tells them that there is a bomb attack about to happen. And then he goes to the spot, and deactivates his own bomb, and everyone thinks that he risked his life to save them. No one suspects that he planted the bombs there in the first place."

"Who did he frame for those attacks?"

"He always frames Muslims for all of those bombings inside the United States. Each time, he placed a bomb in some American building, he kept several bodies of Arab or Afghan men next to the attack site. That is how he convinced the FBI and DHS that Moslems were responsible for the attacks. This is exactly how he is planning to do it with the Taliban. He will make the Moslem in Afghanistan look worse than ISIS."

"Are you certain of that?" I asked.

"Mark my words," Andrei assured me, "within a few days, this Italian army officer will order his agents to dress in Taliban clothes, and burn children in cages, carry out mass genocide, and assault women, with videos announcing they are doing it for Alla, and Mahomet. Those European mercenaries are not even Moslem, but they will wear tunic and turban, and shout violent speeches, and attack women in the streets. People will believe them and think that the Afghan Moslems are violent, but in truth, Afghans are mostly Moslems, and the Islamic religion does not allow anyone to rape or even touch a woman. Rape is punishable by death in Islam, and forced marriage is also illegal. Moslems are ordered to be respectful towards neighbors, and show affection to children. But that won't stop this Islam-hating Italian maniac from framing the Moslems. He will make hundred documentary films each month if necessary and upload videos on the internet about how violent the Taliban and Afghans are."

My friend Jonathan was waiting for me at the rear door entrance to the New York City Police Department's 39th Precinct stationhouse on Barkley Avenue in the Bronx. I took one look at his alarmed face and asked him what had happened.

"It is a long story," he said, holding his hands out with his palms facing me.

I demanded a clearer explanation, and Jonathan began to tell me what he had found out at the police station. He also told me how Richard had hired numerous killers and mercenaries to harm and kidnap my adopted family.

I glanced at the images Jonathan showed me. "So far, this man appeared to be most dangerous." I commented.

"Are you talking about Bruno Grünewälder?"

"Yes," Jonathan replied. "The same man who created the ISIS in order to make Islam look worse than Nazi military brothels. That was why Grünewälder named all the sex-jihad camps *Naza Love camps*, after those Nazi brothels the Germany Army liked to refer to as love camps? He invented the sex terrorism to make the world media believe that Moslems and Arabs are a deviated sex cult. We are the only people who know the real reason he created project ISIS. It was to kidnap your sister, and pimp her out in the slave camps which he created himself."

I interrupted. "We already know he made ISIS in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Turkey. But we defeated those terrorists, real or otherwise."

Jonathan shook his head. "No, what I mean is he is dangerous not only in the propaganda sense, but in reality. Did you know this German criminal has a large depot of nuclear weapons?"

"How did he get his hands on nukes?" I inquired.

"He stole them from a Russian missile storage center in the Urals, and also seized fifty nuclear warheads from an American military base in Luxemburg."

"How did he pull that off?" I asked. "American military bases are one of the most secure places in the world."

"Well, don't underestimate Bruno Grünewälder." Jonathan warned me. "This German guy was able to create Project ISIS without a hitch and no one in the universe suspects that a German-Hungarian man was actually behind the creation of the fake terrorist group."

"What I don't understand is what does Grünewälder plan to do with those stolen nuclear missiles?" I asked my friend.

"I think I can answer that." Jonathan said. "This German mercenary has been detonating nuclear bombs underground sporadically for several years."

"Where?"

"He buried nearly thirty separate nuclear warheads hundreds of feet below ground level, throughout the India-Pakistan border, and the India-Bangladesh border. He remotely detonates the missiles underground, and the nuclear explosion causes significant tremors and low frequency earthquakes in both India and Pakistan."

I asked in surprise. "How do you know this?"

"We observed a series of seismic irregularities in the Indo-Pak region. The earthquakes coincided with your adopted family's trips to India. Our seismology charts revealed that the 5.9 magnitude tremor that rattled the entire border area of India and Pakistan was not a natural earthquake but an earthquake that resulted from an underground nuclear detonation."

"Do they go to visit India very often?" I wanted to know.

Jonathan answered in affirmative. "The Russian woman's husband is originally from East Pakistan, and has relatives in both India and Pakistan. Each time the members of your adopted family visit India, Bangladesh or Pakistan, we noticed that an earthquake takes place. For example, a powerful earthquake of magnitude 6.8 struck in the Pakistani border, and the tremors were felt across North India and Delhi, prompting people to rush out of their homes."

"So, you have real time evidence and data of these tremors?" I clarified.

Jonathan extracted a parchment and showed it to me. "Last year, residents of several areas of Mansehra district in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan reported that five tremors took place on the eve of the Muslim holy month last year." He paused. "The same thing happened the year before."

"I don't see the connection."

"It seems that the German-Hungarian mercenary who managed to get his hands on a number of nukes developed a habit of detonating underground nuclear bombs every time there is a Muslim festival occasion or a holiday. But the odd thing is that these incidents coincided with each time your adopted family went to visit the South East Asian nation."

"Meaning he was behind those nuclear explosions?" I asked.

"Every time your family visits their home country, that part of the continent gets a fair share of tremors. We have reasons to believe that those are caused by nukes."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked Jonathan.

"Underground nuclear detonations cause earthquake with no forewarnings whatsoever. That was how we knew the earthquakes in the Indian and Pakistani border were man made."

"Could it be that the country is located on a geographic Faultline?"

"Negative," my friend replied. "We had scientist study the topology of that region. They confirmed that there were no Faultline in that area, and the earthquakes that were taking place were highly unusual."

"Unusual in what way?"

"In a normal natural earthquake, the seismometers pick up tremors before the actual earthquakes take place. But the ones that happened in the Indian border was not normal. It was a spontaneous tremor, caused by an explosion."

"An explosion?"

"Yes, to be precise, a nuclear explosion underground. We tracked down the originating location of the underground detonation, and discovered the remains of the bomb. In addition to that, our scientists recovered five other mega-nukes that were buried hundreds of feet below ground level, and several of the nuclear bombs were embedded between the India-Pakistan border region of Kashmir. It was a dangerous location to detonate a nuke, because the mountains could have collapsed in the event of an explosion."

"You mentioned something about these manufactured earthquakes taking place in Islamic holidays?" I asked again.

"Correct. Your adopted family went to spend the holiday with their extended family members in 2016, when an earthquake of a 7.1 magnitude occurred on the day of Eid-ul-Fitr. The epicenter of the earthquake was in eastern Bhutan, about two hundred miles northeast of Dhaka. The tremors shook most of Bangladesh including Dhaka, but there were no casualties."

"These earthquakes have been happening every year?"

"Almost," Jonathan responded. "Every time the Russian woman or her husband goes to visit the Indian subcontinent, these unexpected tremors take place. In 2017, another quake with magnitude of 7.3 hit Nepal killing 400 people and jolted large part of Bangladesh and India. We immediately investigated the cause, and confirmed that it was caused by an underground nuclear explosion. In both cases, our scientists concluded that the seismic activities were associated with a large underground nuclear explosion."

"So, it was the German mercenary who was behind all of those earthquakes?"

"I am afraid so."

"This is a frightening idea. I never imagined an underground explosion could cause an earthquake." I said slowly.

Jonathan pursed his mouth. "I think the terrifying part of this is how dangerous this development is. Detonating nuclear weapons underground could cause serious complications in the earth's crusts and surface."

"What else did that German mercenary do to my family?" I inquired.

"The German criminal did not stop with the 2017 earthquake. Six months later, he detonated another underground bomb, and the resulting quake was a magnitude of 6.4 with the epicenter in Assam, India. It was felt throughout Bangladesh but fortunately no major damage was reported. Since normal earthquake preamble was missing from their seismograph charts, our scientists knew it was not a natural occurring quake."

"They have no doubt that the tremors did not occur naturally?" I pressed.

"That is right. You see, an earthquake is triggered by a resonant electromagnetic frequency in the range 0.5 to 12 Hertz, but it is not an instant process." Jonathan explained.

"How so?"

"The resonant frequency to cause an earthquake must be precise. When a real resonance approaches, the fault line starts to tremble, much like a string of rope under tension, and that tensed wrangling sends out warnings to the seismographs in the form of steadily increasing transverse shear waves. Our equipment picks up those movement and deliver a specific reading to us."

"Those frequencies couldn't have been readings from a natural earthquake?"

"No," Jonathan answered, "our scientists received a cluster of 'P' compression waves, meaning that it was obviously an underground or sub-sea explosion. These seismic signals that was found in the India, Bangladesh and Pakistan earthquakes looked curiously similar to those generated many years ago by underground nuclear weapons in Finland and Arizona."

"Why would this German mercenary carry out all these nukes and explosions? What does he gain by giving earthquakes?"

"I think the explanation is simple. He was hired by Richard to kidnap the Russian woman's daughter, and he wants to kill the remaining family members before moving in for the grab. Probably to keep his tracks covered."

"Why does this German criminal need to give nukes to kill my family?" I shouted in frustration. "If he wanted them dead so desperately, he could have shot them in cold blood."

"He could, yes, but it is possible that he wants their death to look like the result of a natural disaster like an earthquake. Murdering any of the family members would appear suspicious to us."

"Giving earthquake to 200 million people just to kill the family members of a little girl in preposterous!" I yelled.

"So is creating an entire terrorist organization like ISIS," Jonathan retorted sharply. "Look, this German operative is extremely dangerous. He invented trafficking groups and made sex terrorism to use as a pretext to kidnap the girl. Can you imagine how far he is willing to go in order to carry out Richard's orders. He hired thousands of girls and made them give false interviews to television and newspapers. It is possible only for someone so psychotic to give nukes underground and kill two hundred million people in massive earthquakes."

"The Pakistan Metrological Department reported that an earthquake measuring magnitude 5.8 on the Richter scale was felt in upper parts of the country."

"Wouldn't some law enforcement agencies have stopped him?"

"He is very resourceful. A man who possesses so many nukes definitely have a backup plan, and he will make sure police cannot touch him." He remarked. "You must remember: he created the Project ISIS very easily, and was perfectly capable of creating a fake Taliban government in Afghanistan after overthrowing the legitimate government in one week. It is highly probable that Bruno Grünewälder would hire his mercenaries to dress as Afghans and take over Afghanistan Nuclear Energy Program and this would allow him to create his own atomic bomb."

"But I thought the Italian man was personally responsible for creating the fake Taliban group."

"Richard had two favorite employees working for him ever since 1979. The German mercenary and the Italian-American naval commander. They both played a major role in creating Taliban, and other terrorist groups."

"What was the Italian man's real objective?" I asked.

"He was not the sole mastermind of the fake Taliban group. His German friend is currently planning to use the Taliban government as a cover and steal hundreds of nuclear warheads from the Pakistani military bases."

"Why does he want to do something so risky?" I questioned.

Jonathan replied carefully. "The German man is desperate to make sure that when he detonates nuclear weapons over countries, he can safely blame the attack on either the Taliban government in Afghanistan, or the Pakistani government directly."

I inquired. "How do you know all this?"

"Last month, the National Security Advisor, and the Secretary of Defense were both threatened and blackmailed severely by this German man." Jonathan said.

"Why did he threat those two men?"

"It was all part of a plan," my friend explained. "He told the Secretary of Defense to immediately release a public statement announcing that the Taliban was going to acquire two hundred nuclear tipped missiles from Pakistan, and detonate it over the United States, Canada, China and Russia."

"The Defense department agreed to release such a false statement?" I gasped. "Why?"

"They had no choice. He threatened to detonate an underground nuke below Washington D.C. and New York City if those men did not follow his instructions to the letter."

"I don't understand his agenda. If he wanted to detonate a nuclear bomb over the United States, why didn't he just go ahead and do it?" I asked my friend. "Why go through all this masquerade and threaten the NSA director, and make them give out false statements accusing the Taliban of imaginary crimes?"

"I think this is his insurance policy." Jonathan sighed heavily. "The German man plans to use the Taliban to nuke several powerful countries, but he knows that if he does that, many intelligence agencies will begin to investigate and find out the real mastermind. They would surely find out it is him. So, before they manage to do that, he wants the rest of the media and law enforcement agencies in the United States to think that the Taliban are close to acquiring nuclear bombs."

"I find it hard to believe one man would go so far to cover his tracks." I said softly.

"He would, especially since he is planning to detonate multiple nuclear bombs over many densely populated cities."

"Well, the CIA and the SVR should be notified of this threat." I suggested. "If they do not apprehend this German man and his Italian friend, then I am afraid the world may become embroiled in a series of chemical, nuclear and biological warfare."

"As much as the idea of this fake Taliban group and their Eastern European mercenary leaders worry me, I am much more concerned about the safety of your family right now."

"My family is in danger again?" I gasped.

"Liam and Sam have appointed several trustworthy men to keep a close watch on your family, especially the youngest daughter who had become a Christian Orthodox nun. But it is becoming more and more difficult to keep her safe." Jonathan remarked.

"Why?" I said. "Did anything happen?"

Jonathan sighed. "Something terrible was *about* to happen. We were guarding a hospital recently, because your adopted sister was scheduled to have appendix surgery, and she was in the operating room with doctors and nurses who were all vetted from before. But one of our sentries saw a suspicious looking man in surgical mask entering the operating wing. So, he followed. The man entered the room in which your sister was being anesthetized, and he shot the other nurses and ordered the surgeon to remove the little girl's ovary and other reproductive organs."

"Why? Why did that man want to take my sister's ovary?" I asked pleadingly.

"I was able to find out, because before the doctor could make incisions on her body, we barged into the operating room, and stopped them, and arrested that man."

"Who was that perverted man?" I demanded.

"His name was Caleb Mitel. He was a professional criminal, that was hired by Richard."

"Cynthia's stepfather hired that man to break into my sister's operating room. Why on earth would he do that for?" I screamed.

Jonathan paused. "Caleb Mitel and his associate was given hundred million dollars each. Richard ordered them to either kidnap your sister, and assault her and force her to give birth to several children."

"Why?"

"Richard said he wanted the American nun to give birth to babies, so that he could take those children away and abuse them and sell them to sex slavery from their infancy. He hired dozens of men with the same task, but most of them failed to come near your sister, as we have been guarding and protecting her with our life. But that criminal in the hospital came very close to achieving his objective."

I asked urgently. "But he was not trying to kidnap my sister, was he?"

"No," Jonathan said. "The criminal knew he could not run ten feet and escape with her unconscious body, so he ordered the doctor to remove her ovaries and deliver it to him in a protective case."

"I still don't understand what he wanted to do with her ovaries." I muttered helplessly.

"It was all part of a very sick job. Richard ordered them to give children from the American nun, so he decided to steal her eggs and fertilize them in a clinic and deliver babies using a surrogate with her DNA, so that he could receive payment from Richard. According to his interrogation transcript, the criminal said Richard promised him additional fifty million dollars for each child that he could deliver using your sister's eggs and DNA." Jonathan informed me.

"Who was the man in the operating room?" I asked again. "How come he was so dangerous?"

"Caleb Mitel. He was arrested by American police on three separate occasions in Arizona, Oregon and Washington. He was classified as a Tier 3 sex offender. The Feds suspected that Caleb Mitel controlled a network of child traffickers and personally sold dozens of underage girls to African and European human smugglers."

"Why would Richard hire such perverted minded criminals to hurt my sister?" I said, exasperatedly.

Jonathan nodded sympathetically and told me that Caleb Mitel and one of his Hungarian associates had planned to seize my sister's reproductive organ from the hospital and fertilize those eggs using donors, and sell the future babies to child sex traffickers.

The plan sounded more than horrifying. It was inhuman. Jonathan told me that the Hungarian man spent time in prison for child neglect and sexual battery, respectively and when Europol arrested him six years ago, he pleaded guilty to multiple counts of child neglect. Interpol detectives later discovered the images of hundreds of children on his laptop.

Mátyás Grósz had pleaded guilty to attempting to kidnap several Russian teenagers and attempting to arrange the commission of a child sex offence and of making indecent images of children.

Jonathan and my other friends spoke to the state District Attorney, who assured them that they would look into the case and try to find the ring leaders of the child trafficking ring.

My head ached from hearing these terrible news and I asked Jonathan what else he knew about the Hungarian human trafficker.

"The other man served nineteen years in a prison in Budapest, and after coming to the United States, had to register as a sex offender." Jonathan said. "His used an alias while travelling in the United States, but his real name was Ferenc Andrassy."

"He is Hungarian?" I inquired.

"Yes, he is originally from Budapest, and is believed to have founded three separate sex-trafficking rings in Eastern Europe."

"Who else did you find?"

"There are hundreds of men involved in this trafficking business, and Richard paid all of them to kidnap and assault your sister. One of the leaders were Mátyás Grósz."

"You mentioned he was one of the kidnappers?"

"Yes, he was arrested recently and gave a full confession to the authorities. He and his cohorts were given three hundred million American dollars in exchange for a small job."

"What kind of job?"

"We were able to get information from a man named Parnell. He was one of the Canadian pimps who Richard hired."

"He is based in Canada?"

"We identified one of Mitel's associates as Todd Parnell. He has a long list of criminal offenses listed under his alias, and was previously sentenced to thirty years in federal court for the part of his crime that involved distributing child pornography." Jonathan replied in affirmative. "In Canada, that man had already served time on federal child pornography charges when was hired by Richard to kidnap your sister as soon as she travelled unsupervised." He paused. "After we had him arrested, the judges sentenced him to additional prison time in Toronto Common Pleas Court."

"He admitted to being hired by Richard?" I asked.

"After he was arrested, Parnell pleaded guilty only to charges of rape, pandering sexually-oriented material involving minors and tampering with evidence. He avoided a longer sentence by denying having the knowledge about this child trafficking ring."

"So Todd Parnell and Caleb Mitel were working together to kidnap the Russian woman's daughter?"

"Yes, but they were planning to do a lot worse than merely kidnapping. They wanted to forcibly impregnate her and sell those children to human traffickers. It was all part of Richard's twisted plan of revenge on you." Jonathan looked grieved. "I wish we knew how many people Richard had hired to hurt your family, but the list gets longer every day. These pimps hired subcontractors to work for them. For example, Mitel's girlfriend was involved in the child trafficking ring, and worked in the porn industry, distributing sexually

explicit pictures of a young children to grown men across darknet. I don't want to imagine what would have happened if we were not there in the hospital to stop those men. We are fortunate to be able to prevent the kidnapping."

"Yes," I agreed. "But right now, those underground earthquakes are frightening me? How is it even possible for one man to detonate so many explosives under the soil, and cause earthquakes?"

"Well, I knew you would be shaken to hear this, so I avoided telling you about the earthquakes that took place in Russia a few years ago."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "Russia almost never has earthquakes."

"That is true. But this German pervert decided to give an underground nuclear explosion beneath Russian soil."

"Which incident are you referring to?" I pleaded with my friend.

"I am talking about the tremors that could be felt in the far east, in 2009." Jonathan replied. "The Khabarovsk earthquake occurred as the result of an underground nuclear explosion triggered a series of tremor beneath the normal faulting within the lithosphere of the Pacific plate. The epicenter of this earthquake was just east of Sakhalin, which marked the sea-floor expression of the plate boundary between the Pacific plate and the Okhotsk microplate."

"Was there any particular reason the German man chose to pulverize Khabarovsk?"

"Khabarovsk city was the administrative center of the Far Eastern Federal District of Russia, and the earthquake jolted the residents severely. Apart from being the largest city in the Russian Far East, Khabarovsk is the main producer of industrial explosives for the Russian defense systems."

"He is targeting Russia now?" I whispered in anguish.

"It seems so. Richard and his German and Italian friends are interested in destroying not only Russia, but also your adopted family. Keep in mind that the earthquake took place only after they arrived in Russia."

"It can't be. One person can never be so powerful as to give an underground nuke inside Russia. Could the earthquake be natural?" I asked.

Jonathan shook his head. "I wanted to dismiss the timing of the earthquake as a coincidence, but it took place exactly one day after your adopted family came to visit the Russian Federation. They were leaving the Magadan oblast and were making their way to the Khabarovsk Krai by bus when the earthquake took place."

"What did it have to do with the Russian woman and her family?"

"As bizarre as it sounds," Jonathan replied, "it seemed that the German criminal detonated an underground nuclear bomb, and the explosion caused a series of earthquakes in the region."

"Was the quake a powerful one?"

"Yes, it was eight on a Richter scale."

"I don't believe it. Giving an underground earthquake in Russia only because a little girl went to visit the country? It is insane."

"Well, Richard is insane about Cynthia, and he certainly wants revenge on you and thinks that by hurting and killing your family, he can make you suffer."

"But the American nun is innocent. She is a little stupid girl. I don't want to believe it. Can it be something else?"

"You tell me. We brought in experts, and dug up the nukes from hundreds of meters beneath the earth's surface. So, we know it was from an underground earthquake."

"What did she do to them?"

"They blame her for not getting their payment from Richard. All the pimps received instructions with the promise that if they kidnapped and sold the American nun into sexual slavery, then they would be given hundreds of millions of dollars. That is what gave this German-Hungarian man to detonate so many underground earthquakes in the India-Pakistan border as well."

I asked again. "You have no doubt that the tremors in India were man made?"

"No doubt," Jonathan responded resolutely. "We even traced the man who was behind the entire earth quake series in India. It was an Indian billionaire who received huge sums of money directly from one of Richard's off shore numbered accounts in Thailand."

"But why don't you report that German man to the FBI? If he is so dangerous as to be giving live nukes across the world, we have to stop him."

"That man is too well connected." My friend explained. "He worked under Richard's supervision for many years, and now has connections in the upper echelons of the government. He currently liaises with secret offices at Homeland Security and the State Department as well as several NSA secret programs. He has contacts in the state of Washington alone who provide him with hundreds of valid state driver licenses in fictitious names. That man is virtually untraceable."

"I wish Richard would leave my family alone." I said quietly, bowing my head in sadness.

Jonathan sighed. "I am afraid that is something Richard will never do. As long as he is alive, he and his mercenary employees will do everything in their power to destroy Russia, and hurt your family members."

SKIRMISHES IN THE BORDER:

Situation across the border areas were becoming progressively worse. Countries in the Balkans did not get along as smoothly as before. And in the midst of all regional troubles, the damning effects of the ruthless mercenary group which created the recent Taliban group in Afghanistan and was using independent contractors to ignite wars and conflict were becoming increasingly unpleasant.

The Italian-American Admiral Baldassarre Bastico hired thousands of mercenaries in Ukraine, and his handpicked men formed a ruthless local militia known as the Azrael Regiment, a neo-Nazi group who openly professed hate for Russians. Those mercenaries were mostly local criminals who were paid thousands of dollars by the Italian-American admiral and were ordered to infiltrate into Russia in large numbers and wreak chaos within the Russian government's infrastructure.

A group of foreign mercenaries were actively involved in sabotaging certain government and military building around the Ukrainian border. The Kremlin suspected that those criminals were determined to spark a warfare between Russia and Ukraine. A few days later, several unexplained fires and attacks took place inside Russia, and many places in Russia came under heavy attack. Only two men were captured when saboteurs loyal to the black ops division of NSA, and employed by an Italian former mafia boss, had set fire at the fuel depots in Belgorod and Bryansk near the Ukrainian border, hoping to spark an internal war between Ukraine and Russia, along with another attack which included a bombed a gunpowder factory in the Urals city of Perm. Another group of French-Canadian mercenaries used explosives to demolish an aerospace research institute in Tver. I personally visited Ukraine in an attempt to find out who was funding these foreign criminals. What I found out in Ukraine was beyond shocking for I discovered the mercenary group that was determined to destroy the Russian Federation.

There were so many countries along with numerous criminal organizations which desired to humiliate Russia. The leaders of Western Europe viewed their countries as God-given superpowers with unending influence in Europe, Asia, and Africa and ultimately the world. Some really believed that their ideology was divinely inspired and had to expand, so they could promote its culture, values and spirit amongst the heathens of Eurasia who have strayed from the golden path of democracy,

However, in Ukraine, the media was once again being used as a weapon to facilitate the killing of innocent people. As such, the man who framed Russians for heinous crimes and carefully framed Muslims for ISIS bombing attacks had hired scores of propagandists, pamphleteers, and dime-novelists to spread false rumors to the public. The main outline of their false propaganda was to instill a twisted view of the world to the people, which most unsuspecting citizens would believe to be the undoubtable legitimating ideology.

Through a near-infra-red glass, I searched the area. It was an unnerving sight, but I knew vegetation appeared red through these glasses, while rocks and bare glass appeared brown. Several hundred people had just been executed. They were ordinary civilians, shot dead and dumped into a mass grave. Churches and school buildings had been bombed and burned to cinder. The high spatial resolution of the telescope allowed me to survey the damage done to the area.

I subsequently trained my high-powered binoculars at the other end of the hill. There were movements of large trucks and other special vehicles. I then realized that it was a professional filming crew, with several hundred actors dressed in Russian uniform, all being administered makeup and fake blood smudges on their uniforms to resemble actual battle footage. Then a truck with a mounted camera began to roll, while a chubby man who looked like a film director shouted orders to the actors. I checked my electronic map. It showed the name of this location as Meshkovka, a small town in Ukraine's Nikolaev Region. As soon as the camera began to film the scenes, the actors dressed in Russian uniforms brandished automatic weapons and executed a hundred civilians with their hands bound in the back. After the shooting scene, make-up artists hurried to pour buckets of red ink over the bodies, and trampled over the bodies as the director continued to take still pictures. Finally, the director shouted. This time, all the dead civilians got up and changed their outfits into Russian uniforms and continued to pose for the videos, sitting on armored vehicles which were painted with the Russian flag, and shouted expletives into the lens. The film director then handed out pages of propaganda material which the actors in Russian uniforms began to read aloud. It mentioned how the Russian soldiers were ordered to rape and kill all the children in Ukraine. All the actors enthusiastically read their lines, and the director seemed satisfied with the performance, and ordered the second episode to be filmed. A professional-looking film crew got into position the moment he shouted, "Action!" and two groups of armed men in the uniform of the Armed Forces of Ukraine came up with their hands raised. Each man was waving a small white flag. The director and film crews seemed to have used pyrotechnics to simulate enemy fire. One of the armored vehicles looked slightly odd to me, and I realized it was a

local vehicle that had been roughly painted in Russian national colors. I realized that the Italian mercenary's film crew was unable to get any actual Russian armored vehicles for the mass murder scene and used Ukrainian ones instead.

The scene looked frighteningly realistic, and if I personally did not see the filming crew running around with their cameras, I would never have realized that it was a scene from a propaganda film. Any civilian, or even battle-hardened experts, would not imagine that these fake atrocities were being filmed in a movie studio, in order to malign the name of the Russian armed forces. I knew the film would soon be released to the media outlets in the United States and England among other nations, and everyone who watches it will think that Russian soldiers were carrying out mass murders and genocide in Ukraine.

I contacted two of the SBU officers who had once been my dear colleagues during a reconnaissance mission in Vilnius. I alerted them about the filming crew that was recording false narratives about Russian soldiers, and he promised to look into it. One day later, he assured me that they have taken care of the problem, and that the film will not be allowed to air on television.

However, three days later, all the major dailies and television networks were airing stories about a mass murder. American and British papers posted pictures belonging to the Ukrainian film crew, while television reporters showed the videos of actors in Russian uniforms shooting civilians in the back of the head. Overnight, all world leaders cried foul, condemning Russia for carrying out genocide and war crimes. I personally began to make phone calls, and contacted over fifty newspaper and television channels and informed them that the images and videos they have are fake and were filmed as a movie. But they refused to believe my words. I begged them to speak to me, but as soon as they heard my slightly Russian-accented English, the reporters refused to talk and hung up the phone. I was terribly sad to see all my efforts being futile. But it was not surprising. This sort of treatment was not new to me, as I had faced the vitriol brunt of Russophobia since my arrival in the United States. I hoped this behavior would abate with time, but with each passing of the years, Russophobia continued to develop in an asynchronous fashion, spurred on across local, national, and transnational resonances with securitization and racist anti-immigrant rhetoric in America. I later contacted an official at the Russian Defense Ministry, who confirmed that the videos of fake massacres and genocide were actually created by corrupt filmmakers who worked for an Italian-American mercenary leader, whose agenda was to spread false narratives about Russia, and make the global community hate the country. The brief clips from the movies which showed bloody shootout scenes were very obviously fake, with the hundreds of alleged Russian troops, being played by a group of Ukrainian militias. The same filming crew also recorded the testimony from fifty local actors, all accusing Russian troops of raping their children and the elderly men and women. Each actor wept bitterly to the camera and displayed numerous blood-soaked injuries, which were carefully replicated by skilled artists to appear like a real machete or bullet wound. The footage of staged testimony by these actors was also scheduled to be aired on British and American televisions, but I was able to send those media outlets the original film, which showed movie producers and directors shooting the film. Once the British reporters received solid proof that the videos were fake, they no longer agreed to publish those fake and demeaning videos and ruin the stellar reputation of honorable Russian servicemen and women. For Russian nationals who lived abroad, life was getting more and more difficult each day. Even after many complaints from human rights groups, the theoretical interventions of authorities within the continental United States remained woefully incompetent even as new permutations of Russophobia emerge. Years have passed in which I was condemned to be a hapless witness to the suffering and degradation of my homeland. Upon arrival in the United States, I was able to see the matrix of localized racialization, a depth in feelings in relation to an imagined white homogeneity and defensive bigotry in America, and occasionally in Europe. The increasing tensions and violence related through embodied difference, community, and social justice movements in this country emerged as a broad theme of this phenomenon, speaking to the political narratives that galvanize hate crimes against Russians, as well as the potential for coalitional action. I alone was unable to change anything for the better, and I continued to suffer in silence.

More and more mercenaries were being recruited each day. Thousands of British, French, Canadian, American and Polish men and women volunteered to fight against Russian troops. Each person was promised five million dollars for one year of service. It was a tremendous amount of money for ordinary killers-for-hire. They were mostly former military men, but some were seasoned criminals who had served years in prison on murder or drug charges. They enthusiastically framed Russian soldiers for vile crimes, and occasionally, captured prisoners of war and forced them to pose in front of cameras and admit to a plethora of crimes. I was able to intercept the video recording of a Russian tank commander who was kidnapped by those mercenaries. The young man was only twenty-three years old, and had left a young wife and two children behind in Omsk. The Russian Defense Ministry found it unusual that the wife and two children went missing one day after the tank commander was kidnapped near the Russia-Ukraine border. Later that day, a video was uploaded to all major news channel which showed the tank commander sexually assaulting a toddler, and he was seen bragging about his actions and taking numerous selfies and videos documenting his own crimes. The next day, three of his men who were also captured along with him performed similar vile acts on elderly men and women in Ukrainian villages. Locals also accused them of molesting school boys. Another soldier who was briefly arrested and released the same day accidentally uploaded an audio recording

with his mother where he boasts happily about murdering infants and assaulting their mothers. The Russian mother who was on the other end of the line praises the son and encourages him to assault more women and children. These were merely a small series of hundreds of fake videos and recordings that the Russian soldiers were forced to take responsibility for. Some objective viewers expressed shock at these crimes. Many people found it too bizarre to be true. Some wondered how illogical it was for honorable Russian mothers to be supportive of their sons when they commit crimes! However, I analyzed one of the videos and found that it was not entirely doctored or fake. The Russian soldier in the video was not an actor. He was the real officer who was captured earlier that day. I wanted to find out why a man would agree to record himself committing such degrading crimes, so I went to the location where the Russian prisoners were being held. Inside the bombed compound, I found a room looking similar to the place where the selfie was taken. Behind the table was a camera stand, now broken in several places, but a small colorful object caught my attention. It was a little rubber doll. I peered closer and then saw the most horrific sight! Two children were lying dead on the ground. The older girl was missing all her fingers! They had been surgically cut with scissors. Who would ever torture a child?! The one-year-old had a dent in his skull, and likely died after being banged against this table. I felt tears well in my eyes, but I forced the tears back. The siblings had suffered unspeakably in the hands of heartless monsters, but I had to maintain my composure and find out who did this appalling crime. Upon closer inspection, I matched the faces of the two children with the small file I was carrying. Both were the offspring of the Russian tank commander who was recently captured and had mysteriously released videos and selfies showing himself abusing Ukrainian toddlers. One week later, my investigation led to another underground factory. Local Russian border guards launched a massive investigation and located the missing wife of the tank commander. She was locked in a cell with three other women. Two of them were the mothers of captive Russian soldiers and one was the daughter of a Russian major. They had all been sexually assaulted by mercenaries, and humiliated in front of their husbands or threatened with excruciating torture if the Russian soldier did not cooperate and make those disgusting videos. I was shocked by the uncivilized behavior of these criminals who received millions of dollars for killing Russians and working so hard to make the world think this nation was filled with barbarians.

There was no doubt that the mercenaries were hell bent on reducing Russia to life-threatening destitution. The majority of the world had left it isolated and sanctioned. Despite having reserves of petrol and natural gas, sanctions prevented this energy being sold and the nation will be left with a decrepit economy, with hardworking honest citizens wallowing in mass poverty. And when shortages of food and goods will be commonplace, the young and the bright ones will try desperately to flee the country. Russia's population growth will then become minimal, and it may fall twenty years behind civilization.

For several months, small groups of heavily armed men slipped through the border and disrupted power supplies in the Valuyki and Millerovo areas. Russian military officials arrested hundreds of saboteurs from Ukraine after they were caught entering Moscow's territory. Russian troops and border guards also intercepted nearly a thousand heavily armed mercenaries who were part of a diversionary reconnaissance group that was attacking residents in the Rostov region. A week later, eight Ukrainian army infantry fighting vehicles crossed the state border into the Russian Federation to bring in more sabotage group from the territory of Ukraine. However, when the Russia's Southern Military District chief interrogated the Ukrainian men, one of them admitted that they belonged to an independent mercenary group led by a man named Baldassarre Bastico, an Italian-American mercenary leader who was once an employee of the notorious NSA black ops as well as CIA analyst. For several months, mercenaries belonging to the Italian man's sabotage and reconnaissance groups continued to violate the Russian border.

When my friend in the FSB informed me that this kind of disturbances were taking place in the Russian border with Ukraine, I found it strange as to why a group of peasants from Ukraine would take such big risks and try to breach the border and sabotage Russian government buildings. I wanted to know what was really going on, and when I arrived in Ukraine, I reached out to several of my old friends, men I knew from the days I used to work for the Russian colonel.

I discovered some interesting information after personally flying to Kiev, and there, I met with Ukraine's Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, a man who was known for his honesty. He said that there were many mercenaries and armed vagabonds adrift the streets of Ukraine, and they are instilling terror in to the hearts of the local population by shooting innocent civilians. Most of the terrorist were dressed in Russian uniforms, and those wearing civilian clothes were using Russian guns and operating Russian vehicles, in an effort to make Ukrainians believe that the war with Russia was brutal and ruthless.

The attack on Ukraine was meant to be cosmetic only, and the Russian leaders had no intention of ever striking or bombing any Ukrainian city. However, the Russian president faced several deadly threats from a stealthy entity. Everything that was transpiring today had begun several months ago, when a blackmailer contacted the supreme leader of the Russian Federation, and threatened to unleash unspeakable horror on the innocent nation.

Six months ago, a man named Anatoly Troshev, a decorated general who was the commander of the Transbaikal Military District, disappeared from his post. He had been posted to supervise the ultra-secretive nuclear storage facility beneath the rocky hills of Buranovo, a rural locality in the Kalmansky District.

Although the area looked typical of any Russian countryside, with picturesque scene of rural penury and residents living day to day on dairy farming, carving garden plots and gathering food in the forest, like honey and mushrooms. Only miles away from gigantic stacks of split birch firewood, Buranovo underground facility stored fifty of the most powerful nuclear weapons that were created in the Russian military's arsenal. It was stored securely behind steel-reinforced wall, and was entrusted to the care of the decorated war veteran, General Anatoly Troshev.

However, when the general went missing, the military was surprised to see that all the supply of nuclear weapons were also missing. The government tried to track where the weapons were taken, but all the tracking devices and chips had been deactivated. Everyone assumed that General Troshev was a traitor and had stolen the nuclear weapons in order to sell it to the highest bidder. But they were all wrong.

One week after the escaped general ran away with fifty nuclear warheads, he contacted the Russian State Duma via a secure untraceable line, and demanded to speak with the president. The president ordered state negotiators to talk to him, and the general said he would detonate one of the nuclear weapons over Russia, if the president did not immediately declare war on Ukraine. This was a bizarre request, and the peace-loving Russian people did not want any war, and therefore, the president told the general that Russia will never do something so preposterous like invading a neighboring country. After this teleconference, the general disconnected from the call. One hour later, there was huge blast. The earth shook. And bright sparks were seen from hundreds of miles away. The sky was becoming cloudy and satellite images showed a huge portion of a town was on fire. An accident took place in Yakutia. Only hours later did the Russian government realize what had happened. They found out that the general who blackmailed them had actually detonated a nuke over Yakutia, a vast semi-autonomous republic around three thousand miles east of Moscow. The population of that area was small, but it was known to be one of the coldest inhabited places on Earth. Men in Kremlin worked hard to keep this news of the nuclear blast from leaking from the press and foreign media, and emergency workers hurriedly evacuated the area. Since they did not want to alarm the population, the government announced that everyone needed to evacuate due to an impending forest fire. The government decided to give locals this excuse. It was a terribly tragic event, and the Russian government knew that the man who was blackmailing and threatening them was serious about detonating nuclear weapons over Russia. As radiation from the nuclear attacks began to erase all life from the Kyuyorelyakh village west of Yakutsk, the president ordered troops to mobilize and march near the Ukrainian border. He also ordered many media personnel to air those scenes on television, so that the general believes that Russia will soon invade Ukraine. Everyone in Moscow thought as long as General Troshev thought they were going to invade Ukraine, he would not detonate another nuclear bomb over Russia. However, this charade did not last for too long. For several days, Russian tanks and ground troops were mobilized near the Ukrainian border, and the news media of Europe and America consistently reported that a Russian offensive was impending. Many foreign leaders warned the Russian premier that invading Ukraine was going to be a mistake. This impasse went on for a while, until three weeks later, a second nuclear bomb was detonated over Tabor. This time, casualty list was long, as thousands of deceased bodies were recovered from the nuclear blast zone. The two nuclear attacks on Russian soil were nerve-wracking. This was arguably the first time a dirty bomb struck the Russian Federation. More frightening was the fact that the bomb was detonated by a zealous Russian general who had been forcing the government to invade the neighboring Ukraine. At least, this was what the Russian intelligence officers thought at that time. They had little idea that the entire nuclear attack was being ordered and orchestrated by the Admiral Bastico, the Italian-American man who had been loyal to Richard for many years.

After the nuclear blasts, when the Russian leader finally agreed to invade Ukraine officially, in order to stop the blackmailer from detonating a third nuclear bomb over mainland Russia, Baldassarre Bastico, the Italian man who created ISIS with his mercenaries, immediately hired several hundred Ukrainian female agents in order to speak on live television and give false interviews about how their families and everyone in their villages were being massacred by invading Russian forces.

When I first saw several women weeping loudly and speaking to Ukrainian national reporters about how thousands of civilians were being murdered in their villages, I immediately rushed on a nondescript vehicle and went to the village to speak to those women who gave the interview. When I arrived at the village near Kharkov, I noticed that the town was intact, and not a single residential building had been bombed. I later contacted the reporter, and asked him to give me the addresses and phone number of the Ukrainian woman who gave the interview about Russian forced bulldozing civilian homes. I was finally able to track her down. The woman was living in an expensive underground hotel, and when I wanted to know her identity, she said she was a special agent with the SUB, an intelligence division of Ukraine. I asked her why she gave the interview and lied to reporters about her town being destroyed. The woman became very angry and refused to answer any further question. Before I left the bunker, I quickly used an electronic device to

extract all intel from her tech devices and I saw that she had recently received hundred thousand dollars from the Italian man, along with hundreds of emails and text messages in which she was ordered to give fake interviews, and shout to reporters about how ruthless Russian invaders were. I didn't know why the mercenary leader wanted to make Russia look criminal in front of the world media, but I guessed that it was a useful way for him to prolong the suffering of the Russian Federation. He doubtlessly hoped that if the global leaders saw these interviews, they would believe those women and think that Russian soldiers were guilty of war crimes, and therefore, they would be eager to pass more and more sanctions on the people and try to cripple the government. Similar to the ISIS sex slavery tapes and movies in which the Italian-American mercenary leader hired women to make videos and cry hysterically on television in order to convince viewers that the terror network in Syria were controlled by Arab Moslem men. Admiral Bastico did the same thing in Ukraine and paid young and elderly Ukrainian women thousands of dollars to cry in front of broken buildings and lie about how their children were executed by Russian soldiers.

Each day, this fake news was circulated with more rigor and desperation. And the plan worked. European countries along with the United Nations continued to think that Russia was violating international laws, and they increased punitive sanctions on the country. Every single nation in the world slapped sanctions and monetary penalties on innocent Russian citizens and entrepreneurs. They all thought that Russia was an aggressor nation, but none of them had any idea that if Russia did not attack Ukraine immediately, another populated city inside the beautiful country would have been smashed to pieces in a nuclear blast, like the previous two cities. Rather than showing mercy or sympathy, the European Union disconnected Russian banks from all global payment networks, and banned its athletes and musicians from performing anywhere in the world. Until this point, I did not realize truly how much power the Italian man and Richard had over the world.

I already knew why Admiral Baldassarre Bastico was encouraging this war. The Italian man had created the ISIS sex slavery in Syria and Iraq and he was trying to use the terrorist group in order to make trouble and chaos across the world. And now since Russia was in Syria and Russian troops were actively rooting out all the terrorists who have been training and pretending to be Muslim terrorists, his criminal organization was in jeopardy, especially since Russia identified the original mercenaries who had been in Syria and Iraq. They also threatened to expose the Italian man and his entire mercenary group to the media. In order to stop their interference, the Italian man knew he had to distract Russia and force them to divert their troops away from Syria and Africa and back into Russia. And the only way Baldassarre Bastico thought he could accomplish this was by invading Russia using Ukraine.

I have travelled several times to Ukraine and I met with some honorable leaders there, and one thing I learned was that Ukraine as a nation on its own had no intention of ever invading or attacking a country like Russia because they are not so stupid. However, the Italian man hired thousands and thousands of mercenaries and other criminals and even local militias from Ukraine and ordered them to dress up in Ukrainian uniform and infiltrate into Russia and assassinate and execute important peoples.

Several senior government officials in Russia figured out that Ukrainian mercenaries were trying to destabilize the State Duma, and they immediately wanted to stop them. However, the Italian men's personal mercenaries who were breaching the border had nothing to do with Ukraine, since they were independent contractors who continued to attack Russia constantly for several months. After being unable to stop these mercenaries, one of the chief commanders of the Russian intelligence told the president that the only way to stop these mercenaries was to invade Ukraine and to eliminate the terrorists one by one. Those Ukrainian mercenaries were not loyal or patriots. Most of them were not even native Ukrainians but they were paid and ordered to tell everybody that they are Ukrainian citizens and their job was to always dress up in Ukrainian military uniform when they were attacking Russian interests.

Despite the unceasing attacks from the Ukraine border, I was able to convince State Duma officials to hold off an invasion, and to keep peace in the region. However, this was when the terrible incident took place, and a rogue Russian general began to threaten the president and ordered him to declare war on Ukraine. However, the president did not agree to listen to his demands, and then the general told the president if he does not attack Ukraine immediately, he will detonate nuclear bombs over several cities in Russia.

When I heard about this rogue general, the first thought that crossed my mind was how did the man get his hands on weapons of mass destruction? My friend at the SVR told me that the general was the commander of the nuclear facility, and therefore had access to nukes. He ran away from his base months ago, and took all the nukes along with him. The Russian president was terrified of this threat and in order to appease the blackmailer, he made his troops march along the Ukraine border all day in an effort to show the general he was going to attack. But the general was insisting on an immediate attack. Then, after the president hesitated, the general proceeded with his nuke threat and detonated a nuke over Yakutia, a vast semi-autonomous republic around 3,000 miles east of Moscow. The population of that area was small, since not too many people can live productive lives in that part of Siberia. It was known to be one of the coldest inhabited places on Earth.

After the detonation, I was curious as to why no media or local Russian news reported a nuclear detonation in Yakutia? I found out that the Kremlin worked hard to keep this news from leaking, and sent five hundred specialists from Russia's Hazardous Materials Units

to evacuate the area using the pretext of a forest fire. The idea of forest fire sounded believable to most people, and since there had been fires before, the official story was a massive fire in Yakutia was raging. In reality, fire did break out in many parts of the forest following the nuclear detonation, so the government decided to give locals this excuse. It was tragic. Radiation from the nuclear attacks wiped out all life from the Kyuyorelyakh village at Gorny Ulus area west of Yakutsk.

The horror of this act could not escape my mind, and I used all my contacts and resources to track down the rogue general who had been responsible for the unclear attack on his own country. I tracked down the Russian general and saw he was hiding in a secure location. He looked weak, haggard and frightened. I introduced myself to him, and promised not to hurt him, and then I asked him why he was so enthusiastic about detonating live nukes over his home country. After I pleaded with him, the general admitted that he was threatened by the Italian man and was ordered to take the blame, and give nukes, and coerce the Russian government to attack Ukraine. As he spoke to me tearfully, his eyes suddenly froze, became swollen and red, and he abruptly died.

I tried to revive him and took him to the emergency hospital, but the doctors who scanned his brain with an MRI said there was an electronic chip implanted inside his brain, and that it was active, and detonated like a small bomb. I asked them to remove the chip, and inspected the device. It was a small remote-controlled bomb which had a hearing device attached to it. I then realized that the Italian admiral was hearing the entire conversation, and as soon as the Russian general admitted to me about how he was threatened to take the blame for the nuclear bomb, the mercenary leader immediately detonated the bomb inside his head remotely, killing the innocent man instantly. I knew this man was coerced to act in this belligerent fashion, so I tracked his emails and messages and saw he had received hundreds of messages from the Italian man. Admiral Bastico had worked for Richard for many years and he was now using the Russian general to blackmail the premier and coerce the Russian president, by making threats of detonating nuclear weapons. Naturally, everyone in the State Duma was going to think all the threat was coming from the General. How could they ever guess that the Italian mercenary leader was responsible for the carnage? Meanwhile, the Russian president did not give the military permission to attack Ukraine, and as a result, a second nuke was detonated, by the framed general, and this time, the president immediately proceeded with the invasion of Ukraine.

The weapon that was detonated as a warning to the Kremlin was terribly dangerous. It was a one-megaton nuclear weapon with an explosive yield of a million tons of TNT. The blast destroyed a region of 80 square miles, but was fortunately in a location with sparse population. However, this served as a deadly fright to the State Duma members, who all begged the president to listen to the rogue general, and proceed with the Ukrainian invasion. All the leaders in Russia knew that if they did not listen to the man's threats, he would continue detonating nuclear bombs over Russia obliterating one city at a time, until not a soul remained alive.

These words resonated in my ears like the beats of a death knoll. I knew there was no alternative. I personally had to go in the outskirts of Ukraine and find out for myself what was going on. After arriving in the country, I discovered that there were over thirty military facilities across Ukraine, manned and guarded heavily by mercenaries belonging to the Italian man's criminal group. I tried to enter one of the buildings, but the security guards did not allow me to enter. I asked them what this facility was, and their supervisor arrived and showed me a very official looking form, which stated that this facility was actually a Biolaboratory that was funded by the US Department of Defense's Threat Reduction Agency. However, when I contacted the Defense Department, they denied having any knowledge of a facility inside Ukraine. I later found out that the Italian-American man was controlling operations in this lab, and was attempting to release pathogens in to Russian cities. Although the United States Army regularly produces deadly viruses, bacteria and toxins in direct violation of the UN Convention on the prohibition of Biological Weapons, they did not attempt to deliberately infect people from other nations. But since the Italian admiral took over most of the American military leadership posts, he had infected hundreds of thousands of unwitting people and was still systematically exposing innocent Russians to dangerous pathogens and other incurable diseases.

On the way back to London, I stopped at another bio laboratory in Georgia. It was located just fifteen kilometers away from the US Vaziani military airbase in the capital Tbilisi. The scientists and biologists who were working there claimed to be members of the US Army Medical Research Unit-Georgia, but one of the senior researchers admitted that he and his men were private contractors. They were paid handsomely by an unnamed benefactor but did not know the man personally. All of these secret facilities were recruiting stations controlled by mercenaries who were loyal to the Italian-American man. The laboratories in Ukraine were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of locals across the border, who fell ill after getting exposed to botulinum toxin, a bioterrorism agent which have previously been produced at a Pentagon bioweapons facility in the US. Since no botulism vaccines in stock were available during the outbreak in Russia, many innocent people died. Doctors were unable to treat the disease, because Botulism was a rare and extremely dangerous illness caused by a toxin produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. One gram of the toxin could kill as many as one million people. All the labs in Georgia and Ukraine were controlled by the Italian Admiral Baldassarre Bastico, and he hired mercenaries

to bomb and shell constantly all civilian locations in Ukraine using Russian made mortars in order to make it look like Russia was killing civilians.

Several Ukrainian officer who knew from the days when I worked with the Colonel in Russia also complained that there are thousands of mercenaries in Ukraine who are constantly killing civilians using Russian made weapons and wearing Russian uniform, and local police in Kiev made many arrests, but somehow, the mercenaries keep causing chaos and unrest.

Due to the threat of another nuclear explosion taking place in Russia, the Kremlin felt handicapped, and they reluctantly agreed to send in troops to Ukraine, in an effort to show the blackmailers that they were listening to their demands. However, each Russian officer gave specific instructions to their men not to fire any live rounds in the neighboring country.

However, after the invasion started, I went once more to Kiev and Kharkov and met with several Ukrainian officers. I begged them to show some degree of understanding, and told them about the nuclear threat Russia had faced in the past month. I showed them evidence that the Italian man was responsible for stealing nuclear weapons and detonating them over civilian populations. I also told the Ukrainian police officers to show restraints, and finally, one of the mayors agreed to allow Russian forces into their country and make it look as though Russia invaded their nations by force. However, this plan did not work out very well, because soon after the attack began, the Italian criminal sent thousands to Ukraine in order to bomb civilian homes and businesses. Those shootings and bombings were being carried out by Ukrainian mercenaries who have been paid handsomely by the Italian men and since their loyalty was only to their cash, they fought on relentlessly, killing both Ukrainian policemen and the incoming Russian soldiers.

I came across Captain Lavrov, a brilliant tactician and an intelligence officer who was tasked with keeping the Russian border secure. He thanked me for arriving in Ukraine and trying to restore peace, and asked me what else could be done to end this conflict.

I told the Russian officer of all the difficulties we faced concerning the Italian-American mercenary and his unlimited fundings from Richard which he used to hire mercenaries inside Ukraine.

The Russian captain was curious, and asked me, "What is the objective of him doing this invasion now?"

"The Italian Admiral Baldassarre Bastico did this in 2014," I told the officer, "Right about the time when he first expanded Project ISIS, and created sex slavery all over the Middle East. He did not want Russian troops to even dream or dare of entering the Middle East and halt the terror group."

Captain Lavrov nodded. "Of course, I remember. I was in the mission in Ukraine back then. You are right. After several months, when the invasion was over, Russian military was finally able to send their troops over to the Middle East, and in a few weeks, our intelligence officers figured out who were the real criminals. They discovered that the ISIS agents were all paid operatives hired by Baldassarre Bastico. When the Russian Spetnaz threatened to expose the operation to the other nations, including the United States, the Italian man immediately framed them."

I was genuinely surprised. "How?" I asked.

"Baldassarre Bastico stole fifteen Russian tanks and fired at the American troops who were in Syria." Captain Lavrov told me. "American soldiers thought Russian soldiers fired at them, so they launched missiles at them, killing about five hundred men, including bombing the bunkers and secret location of three hundred special forces. Since they were undercover in secret missions, Russia could not officially denounce the American attacks but they suffered a terrible price trying to unframe ISIS, and expose the Italian man's real agenda."

My heart cringed in grief at the loss suffered by brave Russian special forces, and I recalled how the Italian man made a new plot once he realized that he got caught and his plan with creating and framing Arabs under the guise of ISIS was exposed. He decided to create a new government in Afghanistan, known as the Taliban. Except, this time, the Taliban consisted of entirely his men, and all are ex-Moslems, who are also mercenaries.

The captain asked. "What do you think is Baldassarre Bastico's plan with these mercenaries in Afghanistan?"

"The Italian Admiral ordered the leaders of Taliban to take control of Iran, Pakistan and other neighboring nations, and detonate nuclear weapons over those nations."

"How will they do that?" Captain Lavrov exclaimed. "They do not own weapon of mass destruction!"

"I know. One of the SVR agents who went undercover to Kabul told me that the Italian man will supply these fake Taliban with powerful weapons, and frame Afghanistan for the attack. He is determined to frame and blame any and every country in the world except his native Italy. That is his only loyalty."

Captain Lavrov nodded thoughtfully. "Now he plans to destroy Russia, using mercenaries from Ukraine, so that Russia become embroiled in a long war, and when he finally uses Afghanistan to invade Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and other former Soviet states, he will be certain that Russia will not be able to send their forces to halt the warfare." He sighed deeply and asked me. "Do you think there was any specific reason he used Ukraine to attack and provoke Russia?"

"Not really." I answered honestly. "Ukraine shares border with Russia, so it is convenient for them."

The captain nodded again. "Yes, I remember that five months earlier, this same mercenary leader began to operate another criminal group within Kazakhstan. He planned to make the group dress in Kazakh army uniform, or even dissenting civilians, and attack Russia in order to make Moscow send all its troop to Kazakhstan. But fortunately, we were able to intercept messages from a mercenary leader, who was a chief architect of Project ISIS, and we alerted the Kazakh leader as well as Kremlin. Moscow reacted decisively, and sent Russian paratrooper units to Kazakhstan to help its president end mass protests in the Central Asian country."

"What about local Kazakh police and army?" I inquired.

"The mercenaries were being supplied with weapons by the Italian man, so the security forces there had to handle heavily armed men posing as civilian protesters, and amid violent clashes, many police were killed." Captain Lavrov frowned as he recalled what took place in Kazakhstan. "The mercenaries hired by the Italian man tried to assassinate the president, and burn the government buildings in Almaty, Kazakhstan and overran the airports. Soon after, the Kazakhstan's president appealed to Russia for help to bring down the mercenaries who posed as protesters and spread across the country."

"That is what the Italian-American admiral is planning to do now about Ukraine," I commented.

"Fighting with him is futile." The Russian officer said. "Even if Russia is successful in neutralizing all the mercenaries in Ukraine, he will promptly hire another hundred thousand freelance contractors and make them invade Russia, and assassinate leaders of the duma in the oblasts."

"You sound very certain," I said to him.

"We detected large movement of armaments in various locations around Kazakhstan, Belarus, Georgia, Latvia, Estonia and Finland's borders. The Italian man is prepared to use any one of those countries as his base of operation in attacking Russia, until he completely destroys the government from the core. He is angry because the Russian military is independent from his interference. He cannot control the Russian generals as easily as he controls American soldiers and commanders. For example, FAPSI reported that one of the Italian man's closest associates control the US Africa Command. That American general agrees to launch airstrikes in any place in Africa if the Admiral Bastico man demands it. However, he did not find it as easy to pay the Russian military. This month, he attempted to make contact with Colonel-General Sergeyevich Kulikov but he was unsuccessful."

"Why did he target the Colonel-General?" I asked him.

"Because Colonel-General Kulikov was the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Airborne Troops and the mercenary leader offered him billions of rubles in exchange for sabotaging a fleet of fighter jets. So far, the Italian man made his American friends at the AFRICOM bomb strategic locations in Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Tripoli, all under the official guise of eliminating terrorists."

"I did not know about the colonel-general," I said softly.

"We left another news off the reports." Captain Lavrov said. "This week, General Pavel Patrushev was assassinated in his home."

I asked. "Was he very important?"

"He was the head of the State Duma Defense Committee, and had been planning the Ukraine invasion, in order to halt the torrent of attacks that had been spewing from across the border." Captain Lavrov paused. "At that time, many people in Kremlin believed this was the only way to stop the Italian man's mercenaries from crossing from Ukraine into Russia. They have been attacking Russia for many years now, and recently, they began to use sophisticated weaponries that had been supplied to them by the Italian-American admiral. You have doubtlessly heard how the mercenaries in Ukraine used hundreds of rocket launchers to shell residential blocks near Kiev and Lugansk and blamed it on the Russian military. Russian Defense Ministry previously detected instances of attacks by these mercenaries who claim to be Ukrainian nationalists, but constantly bomb their own people in order to make the Ukrainian citizens think that Russia is attacking them."

"Are you certain you have evidence that the Italian man is supplying Ukraine with advanced weapons?"

"Yes. Our intel showed that he also trained his mercenaries and paid agents in the American Air Force are sending strategic U.S. RQ-4 Global Hawk reconnaissance drone and MQ-9A Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles to Ukraine to direct Ukrainian boats to fire at the ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. They are using the MQ-9 Reaper strike drone to attack the ships of the Black Sea Fleet in the area of Snake Island.

You probably heard a large number of Russian planes being shot down. Ukrainian military claimed those victories, but in reality, it was the Italian man who personally was responsible for this."

I said, "I don't understand how."

Captain Lavrov explained. "The Italian-American man recruited over hundreds of the most skilled computer hackers from Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Denmark and Germany, including fifty computer specialists from America, and he paid them to hack into

Russian Defense Department, and other Kremlin websites. We were monitoring the five jets that were downed. None of them were shot down. Out pilots are too well-trained to let their aircraft to be hit. They are skilled in evasion tactics."

"Then why did their planes crash?" I inquired.

"It was hacked." The Russian officer said simply. "All of them were hacked by the team of European hackers who are now using unconventional means to infiltrate into our government's web services.

Several months prior to our move, the mercenaries from Ukraine were using high-precision weapons against the facilities of the Armed Forces of Russia. Those saboteurs launched strikes at the Russian Federation with long-range precision weapons using air- and sea-based cruise missiles against dozens of Russian military infrastructures. At that time, we did not retaliate against the Ukrainian military, because we knew it was the Italian mercenary leader who was personally responsible for it."

"How much damage did those mercenaries do in the past month?"

"They bombed five military airfields, eleven command posts and communication centers, and ninety radar stations. Hundreds of our soldiers were dying. We knew this had to stop, and so we finally prepared to conduct this operation, hoping to eliminate the mercenaries who are hiding within the Ukrainian armed forces."

"This situation is worrying," I commented.

Captain Lavrov waved his hands dismissively. "Personally, I am a lot more worried about Belarus."

"What about Belarus?"

"Our drones over the northeastern and eastern region of Belarus detected suspicious troop movements. Domestic intelligence reported that a heavily armed army is amassing at Lenino. Tens of thousands of armed men."

"It is right next to the border, correct?" I asked, trying to remember where the city was located.

"Yes, only a short distance from our city of Koshelevo. We have reasons to believe the armed men will breach the border any moment."

I asked, perplexed. "It makes no sense why Belarusian militias should breach the Russian border at Sloboda or Markovo illegally. This nation is supposed to be allies."

"About the friendship between our nations," Captain Lavrov said heavily, "there had been rumors that the Belarusian leader joined hands with the mercenaries."

"The Prime Minister of Belarus publicly supports Russian interests, right?"

"True, but privately, he allied himself with the Italian man, which means there is a huge possibility that mercenaries from his country will soon invade Russia along the entire eight hundred miles of the border area."

"Captain, how are you so certain of this?"

"Our intel is solid," he said. "The prime minister of Belarus currently is allowing Russian troops to remain on Belarusian soil, but it is a ruse in which we are humoring them. NATO and the UN believe that Belarus is Russia's vassal and de facto accomplice in the war against Ukraine, but we are technically enemies, because the Italian man controls both Belarus and Ukraine, and is getting ready to launch a joint invasion against Russia."

"How long do is this war in Ukraine is scheduled to last?" I asked.

"The mercenaries are being supplied with billions of dollars' worth of weapons and the Italian man is using his best hackers to corrupt the control systems of our fighter jets, and neutralize our radar stations, but there has been a development recently that makes this conflict slightly more challenging."

"What development?"

"Our forces in Syria, who have been steadily battling ISIS, and the Italian man's mercenaries that are posing as Arab fighters, are now being attacked heavily. The Russian forces have come under heavy artillery fire since the Ukraine dilemma began. It seems that the Italian-American admiral wants us out of Syria, so that he could reinstate the Project ISIS and start another terrorist organization using the Afghan Taliban as a cover." The Russian captain said. "Another disturbing reality is that the Italian Admiral Baldassarre Bastico already have several hundred Russian politicians in his payroll, and he plans to make one of them the president and then slowly, seize control of the entire region. Very recently, when several senior FSB officials and FAPSI's Director, found out about the Italian man, and they realized that Russia was getting vulnerable from all sides, they knew that the Italian man was framing all of Russia's neighboring countries one at a time, and hiring mercenaries from Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Estonia and Finland to sabotage Russian bases near the border area."

"Why haven't FSB tried to arrest this Italian criminal?" I inquired.

"The Russian intelligence attempted to locate the Italian man several times, and even tried to arrest him, but the Admiral immediately killed those all the FAPSI officials who found out about his identity. Now, his only agenda is to destroy the infrastructure of our country."

"Is that the real reason why he is making the international community give sanction to the Russian Federation?"

"Naturally. He is making the international community give so much sanction to Russia, so that the public will feel eager to overthrow Putin, and he will then replace the present president with one of his own men, who will let him dictate all dealings in Russia. He is forcing all the world leaders to give severe sanctions on Russia. But this is not a surprise to us. This Admiral Bastico had planned to do this in 2014, but back in 2014, he did not control all the world governments, so for the past six years, he struggled to retain control over all the European and North American countries. Now he knows he is more powerful than Russians. He astoundingly was able to coerce all other nations to give more sanctions on Russia, even though none of these countries sanctioned the United States when America illegally attacked Iraq and Afghanistan. Surprisingly, this time, the countries in Europe are punishing Russia a lot more than they ever did during the World Wars, when Nazi Germany killed millions of innocent people."

"Yes, I know," I said. "But this plan has been brewing for a long time, so I believe it will take a lot of effort to defeat this disaster."

Captain Lavrov agreed. "This conflict had been brewing since 2010. A few months before the Arab Spring broke out, Baldassarre Bastico hired local thugs and criminals to break into Russian government buildings in Kremlin and paid some of their wives and girlfriends to give him information. We know this because one of the State Duma deputies admitted that he was threatened."

"What did the mercenary ask him to do?"

"It was a tricky venture. The Italian man directly contacted State Duma officials and ordered them to publicly criticize the Russian premier and the president."

"Why?"

"Because he wanted the president to think that those who are most loyal to him are actually his enemies. And those members who were in opposition to the president were ordered to pretend loyalty towards him. In addition to this trick, the Italian mercenary leader also tried to assassinate several journalists and other vocal critics of the president, and of course, framed the Russian president for it. One particular case became very famous in the media, and the international community got involved after an opposition leader got poisoned. His name was Alexander Luvelky, and he began to announce to the media and news channel that the Russian president wanted to assassinate him."

"I wish I understood why this Italian man is so relentless in destroying Russia?"

"He has his own agenda. He created ISIS, and then when Russian forces moved into Syria and stopped the terrorist group permanently, he immediately hired Afghan ex-Moslems to create a new Taliban. His agenda is to make this fake Taliban attack and take over Pakistan, Iran, and finally, the countries around Russia. This is how he works, always pitching one nation against the other. For example, he has been hiring mercenaries in Yemen and making them launch missiles constantly at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and soon, he will make it look as though Iran has attacked Saudi Arabia."

"The situation in Yemen was really confusing."

"It was because of the fake news reports. The media claimed that the Yemeni rebels who are attacking Saudi Arabian cities are ISIS members but in reality, it was the Italian criminal who hired experts to launch explosive-laden drones towards the Saudi cities. The people doing these crimes were actually Eastern European mercenaries, the Saudi-led coalition thought they were fighting Yemen's Houthi group." Captain Lavrov said. "For years, this Italian man uses ISIS as a front for all his terrorist activities. That is why he created this fake group, and made highly trained agents and mercenaries pose as ISIS fighters in videos. Also, this Admiral Bastico is very thorough. He paid his agents millions of dollars to get arrested and go to court. Their job is to sit in front of a jury and tell them how they killed innocent people for Alla and Mahomet and that they are proud to be ISIS fighters. Now, he is hiring mercenaries to pose as Russian fighters and shoot and execute Russian civilians, in order to destroy this nation's images. What makes this worse than Syria is that the Ukrainian leader is also paid and threatened by Admiral Bastico, so he is officially giving backing to the militias."

Aleksei Yermakov, a former State Duma deputy who had been relentless in trying to prevent the attacks from those Ukrainian mercenaries, met with me several times and told me that he unearthed the true motive behind the attack on the border regions. He told me how he discovered evidence that the Italian man was hiring thousands of mercenaries in Ukraine as well as some criminals inside Russia, and trained them to infiltrate into Moscow and bomb all offices in Lubyanka Street in order to begin a war. Aleksei found that this Italian hired thousands of mercenaries in Ukraine. He founded the terrorist faction known as Azrael Regiment, a neo-Nazi group who openly profess hate for Russians. Those mercenaries had been ordered to infiltrate into Russia in mass numbers and wreak chaos in the Russian government's infrastructure.

The former State Duma deputy explained how the mercenary leader was determined to overthrow the current leader in Russia and replace him with a puppet president like president Belstin. His ultimate objective was to take away all the money from Russian banks, and incite riots in the country, and start a long-term civil war in Russia in order to make sure this country never can interfere in any other conflict like the Iraq-Syria conflict.

I did not want to believe everything I heard, so I personally went to Ukraine and searched for locations where the mercenaries were hidden. True enough, I discovered several secret locations in which hundreds of computer hackers were working in order to hack Russian government websites and sabotage state space programs. They were all paid by the Italian-American admiral and were ordered to hack into all official sites in Russia.

Aleksei Yermakov also explained that the Russian president was angry at the mercenaries, especially after they attacked several of his closest associates, and also make threats to his family, so he wanted to take reprisal actions even though he knew that those Ukrainians were under the payroll of Italian mercenary leader.

The former State Duma deputy said that one of the main tricks the former Italian mafia was playing was that he wanted to make the government unstable by making those who were loyal to the president betray him, and those who were disloyal to the president pretend to be devoted to him.

The Italian Admiral, Baldassarre Bastico, tried to make the Russian president's enemies appear like friends to him, while the Russian president's friends were threatened to become unfriendly with him. One of the chief player in this hypocrisy was the prime minister of Belarus, a man who pretended to be Russia's ally, but was actually paid generously by the Italian mercenary. One of the closest aide of the Russian president was murdered in Moscow, near the city's Pushkin Square, after he refused to betray the leader. However, for several months, the saboteurs managed to infiltrate all the cities in Russia, and would have taken over all government buildings by stealth if the military was not mobilized.

I asked him to explain how the saboteurs got access to the government buildings, and the State Duma deputy said, "The Italian man not only targeted Ukraine, he was planning to use Georgia to attack Russia, all for one reason. To keep the Russian military distracted and busy so that they would not be able to stop Baldassarre Bastico's terror projects like Taliban and ISIS. However, fortunately the Russian SVR officers arrested fifty mercenary commandos, all of Georgian nationality, when they were trying to blow up a government office building in Labinsk, a town in Krasnodar Krai located on the Bolshaya Laba River. This coup plan was thwarted, but Moscow did not have enough resources to halt the flow of insurgents coming in from Ukraine. The Italian man had invested billions of dollars."

"Why is this Italian man so angry about the Russian involvement in Syria?" I inquired.

Aleksei Yermakov replied. "He had plans to make ISIS attack Egypt but Russian forces in Damascus figured out he was behind it, and stopped the terror network from expanding. Now he wants Russian out of Syria so that he could restart all his terroristic activities and frame Moslems or Arabs for it. This Italian-American officer tried to discourage Russia from joining the fight against Project ISIS, and he tried repeatedly to scare them. However, when Moscow sent forth military personnel to Syria, he immediately began to intimidate them. He ordered his mercenaries to pose as Arab fighters and capture several Russian special forces. Later, these criminals, under the orders of the Italian man, tortured those Russian soldiers mercilessly, and finally locked them in cages and burned them to death, while filming the entire scene. The Russian government, like the rest of the world, believed that Arab terrorist serving with the ISIS network were responsible for the terrible crime, but they later found out it was the Italian man who carried out the attacks on the Russian forces. After the Russian troops were in full mobilization in Syria and nearly halted all ISIS terrorist activities, they wanted to report to the media about the Italian man and how he was responsible for the terrorist attack. In that occasion, this mercenary leader ordered his operatives and foreign agents in Syria to hijack several Russian tanks, and he fired many rounds at American forces that were in the region. However, the American military did not know that the Italian man's agents were shooting at them from Russian tanks. US commanders thought Russian soldiers were attacking them, and they immediately retaliated by shelling all the safehouses which were home to thousands of Russian soldiers and special forces. This was a terrible tragedy, that caused the death of five hundred of Moscow's best operatives."

I told the Duma deputy how before this Italian mafia man had any power, he worked for Richard and operated in Kabul during the 1990s. Since Richard had always planned to use Taliban to a front or a cover story for all the bombing that he intended to give, he and Bastico went to Afghanistan and paid hundreds of drug dealers and war lords and other ex-Moslem Afghan factions, and paid them to take credit for all the crimes he had carried out, including the one he did on September 11, 2001, on New York City. The recent bloodshed in Afghanistan is the work of this man. He has been blowing up Afghan cities, and other populated areas, and is trying to show the world that the real Taliban are doing it.

"I know that," Aleksei Yermakov said. "My FAPSI sources confirmed that the Italian man was involved in a very close romantic relationship with the American president's daughter, and he used her to gain access to the White House and other national secrets."

Seeing my puzzled expression, he added. "You know, the blonde and stylish fashion designer who worked with her father at the White House. Anyway, this Italian navy commander wanted to get close to the American president's daughter and get access to her father and was hoping to have the president impeached. It was the same way he began a relationship with the wife the Ukrainian prime minister. However, the American president's daughter found out about his true sinister intentions, and broke up with him."

I told Aleksei Yermakov that the Italian Naval commander had been working for Richard until recently, but now he carries out all his terrorism activities, including crafting and designing the terror network known as ISIS and the most recent farce of resurrecting a fake Taliban group on his own.

"This Taliban group is the greatest sham the Italian man is playing," Aleksei Yermakov agreed, "and by building a fake group called the Taliban, this Italian admiral is using German and Dutch computer hackers to pose as Taliban fighters, and are using energy bombs to detonate explosives over Afghan civilians. According to a CIA officer, this Italian man is seriously planning to start a nuclear war against any country that opposes his actions. But before he blows up nukes, he wants a group to assume responsibility for it. That is why he made sure everyone in the world believes that the Taliban had returned to power. He is planning to make a series of violent videos, and upload pictures and videos where fake Taliban agents would declare war in Iran and Pakistan, and steal nuclear weapons from military stockpiles in Islamabad, and detonate it over any country which the Italian man does not like. But all of his plans will fail if the Russian military remains strong, and interferes in these actions. If a terrorist group like Taliban or ISIS appears anywhere on earth, we will move in at once to stop them."

"Is that why so many countries are joining forces to destabilize Russia recently?"

"Yes. Admiral Bastico is now using his connections to pay and coerce dozens of world leaders and force them to approve unjust sanctions on Russia. The United States government was technically against such drastic measures, but the Italian man threatened the United Nations Security Council members as well as the ambassadors of UK, US, Germany and France to place a blanket ban on all Russian banks and make all transaction with them forbidden."

"I know how this feels, because I have been working for an NSA black ops chief when I was young," I told the Duma deputy. "I served Richard loyally, because I thought he was trying to stop wars, but instead, he was angry with me and wanted to destroy Russia. It happened first in 1990s. Richard was eager to destroy the Soviet Union so he killed three presidents in three years, and cunningly rigged the Russian election to bring President Belstin to power. After rigging the election and making sure that the puppet president was in power, even though he did not receive the majority vote."

"What was Richard's objective?"

"Richard ordered president Belstin to invade Chechnya and wipe out every last member of the ethnic Russian Moslem population. Richard wanted only one thing at that time- to wipe Grozny city off the map. When Richard told Belstin to kill at least one million Chechens, the Russian leader did not agree, but since he was a simple hearted, foolish man, he did not know that his deputy president was slowly framing him, and signing laws on his behalf, passing laws that enabled killing of a hundred thousand people and injured another quarter million, while the world population believed it was the doing of Belstin."

"How did you know all this?" Aleksei Yermakov asked me.

"During that war, I personally sent one of my closet friends to President Belstin's presidential palace, and he was horrified to find a large desk piled with signed decrees. All of the signatures were being forged by a corrupt politician, who was Richard's long-time associate and employee. When my friend exposed this man to Belstin, the Russian president at that time was horrified to see his signature of so many bizarre and harsh laws. He did not decree any of those, and yet, his own deputy was framing him, and making it look as though Russia was an aggressor nation."

"I see," Aleksei Yermakov said. "And now, this Italian man is taking Richard's place in destroying Russia."

"You know about the Italian-American man well," I observed.

"We know all about the Italian man's background. It was not a secret that the Italian man was a special force commander during the Iraq and Afghanistan war, and he and his teammates were responsible for executing thousands of civilians in drone strikes. FAPSI also knows that he was reprimanded several times by the American military courts, and demoted and ever since, he had sought revenge by creating new and imaginative terrorist groups in which he framed Moslems for crimes. He created the new Taliban group in Afghanistan recently, because he wanted it to replace the ISIS terror network in the Middle East. His main agenda is to convince everyone who watches the news and television that Moslems are violent. This Italian man ordered his mercenaries in Afghanistan to act like Moslems, and put on beard, and then kill and rape civilians, and murder their own people. Even though none of the leaders who were pretending to be Taliban were Moslems, there were some Afghan nationals who call themselves ex-Muslims and agreed to pretend to be Taliban members in Afghanistan. The Italian criminal leader ordered them to invade Pakistan and Iran, and steal all nuclear weapons from there and detonate it over the neighboring nations. Admiral Bastico ordered those non-Moslem Afghan actors and volunteers to wear

traditional Taliban clothes and then pose as members of the Taliban's religious police, and they video a lot of random scenes where these fake Taliban members beat women and kill children."

"I am surprised you knew the Italian mercenary leader's name and alias." I commented. "FAPSI has a very reliable source of intel gathering."

"The Italian-American man's real name is Baldassarre Bastico, and he was the man who hired Ukrainian mercenaries and supplied them with lots of weapons." Aleksei Yermakov said. "This same man also paid hundreds of Indian and Burmese Hindu nationals and also many Afghan citizens who officially renounced Islam, and had been helping American and coalition troops capture and torture other Muslim Afghans."

I shook my head in confusion. "Why doesn't one person within this new Taliban expose to the world how the Italian mercenary leader created them to pose as fake Moslems?"

"Baldassarre Bastico made sure that all the heads of Taliban are his personal assistants, and those mercenaries are extremely loyal to him, because he pays them a lot of money for their services." Aleksei Yermakov said. "All the Taliban spokesmen are mercenaries from Eastern Europe. They have instructions to use millions of untraceable moneys and overthrow the legitimate government of Afghanistan, and execute women and announce on video that they are killing everyone because Alla and Mahomet told them to kill and torture innocent people. That was his initial plan, but in order to make this Taliban mercenary invade and occupy Pakistan and Iran, Bastico decided to eliminate the only threat that exists in that region; which is Russia."

"And that is why he is using Ukraine to attack Russia?"

"The Italian-American man is targeting Russia because right now, the only country he is being unable to fully control in the Russian Federation. He wants supremacy in every single sector of the world, and in order to do that, he wants to make different terrorist organizations, and make it look as though those terror groups killed people. He uses these tactics to control governments, and threaten world leaders. For example, in the recent skirmishes between Russia and Ukrainian mercenaries, he is forcing many European governments to apply penalties and sanctions to the Russian government."

"Why is Baldassarre Bastico planning to target Russia financially?"

Aleksei Yermakov spoke deliberately. "His agenda is to cripple the Russian economy, and liquidate the ruble, so that the government collapses on its own accord. But his main reason for targeting Russia is that he planned to make this new Taliban a very formidable terrorist group, and use them to make Moslems look like savages. However, none of that will be possible as long as Russia is powerful. He knows that if his mercenaries pose as Taliban fighters, and try to take over neighboring nations like Pakistan, Iran, or Uzbekistan, Russian peacekeepers will immediately intervene, and put a stop to all those mercenary activities like they did in Syria by halting the Italian man's Project ISIS. He is orchestrating this entire warfare with Ukraine in order to weaken the Russian military and force the prime minister and president to divert Russian troops away from the Middle East and bring them all in Ukraine to fight a useless war."

After meeting with the State Duma deputy, I immediately contacted several Ukrainian officials and spoke with the deputy commander of Ukraine's foreign intelligence services. I told him how Russia had no choice but to invade Ukraine, because if it did not do exactly as the blackmailers had ordered, then the Italian mercenary leader will use the Russian general to detonate another nuke on Russia. I begged the intelligence officer to help the Russian forces who were entering his country, and asked him to play along, so that the world media believes that the invasion was genuine. If the Italian man suspected that Russia was only pretending to attack Ukraine, then he would try to drop another nuclear bomb. I only requested the Ukrainian officers not to fight back too desperately, but to only show some dramatic actions, because if Admiral Bastico suspects that Russia was not listening to his threats, then he will attack Russia with another nuclear bomb, and this time, he said it will be over a populated city. Although Russia is vast, they cannot take another blow from a radioactive weapon. The first one in Yakutia was explained off to people saying it was a forest fire. And the second bomb was detonated over Tabor. Over five thousand people died instantly, and the Kremlin struggled to keep it away from the news. However, the next nuke will be dropped on a main city, and thus, I tried in vain to make the Ukrainians understand why Russia had no choice but to attack.

My eyes burned in pain as I wept in agony and despair to see this country getting destroyed, but I was not too surprised. From the beginning of 2010, prior to initiating the Arab Spring in the Middle East, the Italian-American admiral had been hiring and training tens of thousands of mercenaries to carry out small scale attacks on Russia. He used Ukraine, Poland, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Chechnya in order to make Russian leaders believe that their former allies were all trying to wage war against them. And ten years later, the same attacks continued, and people continued to die. And I with mournful breaths, continued to pray for the loved ones who were perishing one by one.

Gone Away

Oh, death! Let us be friends, you and I!
This weary world is lost to me,
I cannot bear the echoes of my cry,
My heart's despair is bereft of litany.

My loved ones have gone away,
Hidden beneath cold foreign graves;
I stand in remembrance and pray,
For my lost kindred and comrades.

Take me, death, for I am ready to die,
Rejoin my comrades with me!
The traitorous tears of my eye,
Awaits the end so eagerly.

MISSION IN CENTRAL ASIA:

I arrived in St. Petersburg briefly in order to meet with Vanya, a robust young man who worked for a Russian military company that operated covertly with the government, and was responsible for unearthing the true identity of most of the ISIS terrorist agents who worked for the Italian admiral. Vanya was one of the few people in the intelligence sector who knew that the Italian Admiral Baldassarre Bastico hired mercenaries and other ex-Moslem criminals to carry out terrorist attacks on various cities.

When I first met Vanya, I saw a concerned look on his face, and asked why he was so agitated.

Vanya immediately told me about the recent disturbance in the Russian border. He said he suspected that the Italian-American officer was most likely behind this unrest.

I quickly asked him, "Tell me. What has been going on?"

"For several months, mercenaries and saboteurs have been crossing the border from Ukraine and breaching Russian border areas in order to carry out acts of terror in our populated cities." Vanya informed me. "My team in the Russian military apprehended several of these agents. That was how we knew that a sinister plot was brewing, and after a lot of detailed investigations, we discovered that the Italian mercenary leader who created ISIS terror group was also responsible for making this."

"Why do you think Italian-American man is targeting Russia from the Ukrainian side of the border?" I asked him.

"Because recently, Admiral Baldassarre Bastico had been trying to distract Russia from unearthing the real culprits behind ISIS and he decided to hire thousands of mercenaries in Ukraine in order to launch hundreds of missile attacks in Russia. On several instances, he tried to kill many Russian leaders, but failed most of the time."

"Were there any casualties?" I inquired worriedly.

"Some of our good men died in the hands of those mercenaries. For a long time, Ukrainian agents hired by the Italian man had been trying to infiltrate into Russian city centers." Vanya told me. "The Kremlin did not allow even local media to get whiff of this, but they knew that five hundred special commandos sent by Baldassarre Bastico seized control, at least temporarily of Lipetsk, and breached the border of Ryazan. These men also killed the entire family of the Mayor Sharakov, of the Yaroslavl Oblast. There were reports that at least two other members of the Yaroslavl City Duma were executed after these mercenaries breached the eastern portion of the Yaroslavl Oblast. The premier immediately sent in special forces and intelligence officers to eliminate those terrorists."

I asked Vanya. "Who were those terrorists?"

"They were all dressed in Ukrainian army uniforms. They were Ukrainian nationals who were insisting they had acted on behalf of the Kiev leadership."

"When did the Russian military intelligence finally realize that the Italian Admiral Baldassarre Bastico had been behind this?"

"We tracked some of the money they have been receiving. Money trail led up to the same shell corporations which have been active since the Italian man launched Project ISIS campaign. However, this time, Bastico was eager to make sure Russia believed Ukraine was attacking them, so that it would retaliate against Kiev."

"Do you think there was any particular reason the Italian man used Ukraine to stage his attacks on Russia?"

Vanya shook his head. "Negative. I know how Bastico works. I saw how he operated with his international agents when they were told to pose in rags and scarves and scream Alla and Mahomet before pretending to blow up themselves. This guy likes chaos, and in the Middle East, he wanted to use ISIS as a front to carry out hundreds of terrorist attacks. But all of his plan failed because our military moved into Syria and ended the terror reign of his agents. This man wants to start wars. He would frame any country in the world in order to force Russia to withdraw its troops from Syria and Iraq, so that he could freely continue to make ISIS terror groups." The Russian man paused. "According to SVR records, this mercenary leader did the same thing in China. Not only did he frame Moslems for many crimes in Xinjiang, he also used the same tactic in Yemen, and is currently framing local Arabs in that country, by sending regular barrages of missiles directly at the Chinese military base in Djibouti. He is desperately trying to convince the Chinese forces that Yemeni rebels are attacking them."

"From where does he send those missiles?" I asked.

Vanya showed me an e-map. "Since the start of this year, the Italian man had fired a series of drone and missile attacks at Chinese bases in Africa, and fired barrages of rounds at the UAE. Naturally, he framed it on Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels."

"How do you know this?" I asked again.

Vanya replied. "Because me and my team were in that region recently and we saw Admiral Baldassarre Bastico was launching missiles from Yemen, and especially from inside the alleged rebel held areas, showing the Chinese government that the Yemeni rebels are shooting at them, so that the Chinese would retaliate."

"DO you have any idea why he tried to bring the Chinese army under his control?"

"China has a huge army with vast resources. The Italian admiral knew if he managed to take China on his side, he could have a firm foothold over Asia. Money is one thing that came to his advantage, because the Chinese bureaucrats are usually more than happy to do anything for anything in exchange for a few million dollars. This is how Baldassarre Bastico easily took China in his pocket, but he was having a more difficult time trying to frame or coax Russia. Money does not work here." My friend explained. "We do not take bribes, and we are not dependent on our economy, at least not on outside supply as like the past Soviet era, this country is still self-sufficient. However, since the Italian man could not bribe or threaten Russia, he decided to frame other countries, any country in the world, and attack Russia."

"What was his main objective?"

"Admiral Baldassarre Bastico's objective is to overthrow the Russian government. He tried using Kazakhstan recently, and orchestrated a coup in order to place a puppet leader, but Russian peace keepers swiftly took care of the rebellion, and arrested all the Kazakh mercenaries who was hired by the Italian man. When using Kazakhstan to attack Russia did not work, he immediately focused on Ukraine. For several years, this Italian man had been using Ukraine to launch hundreds of small-scale attacks on Russia, and he also was responsible for the assassination of many leaders and mayors."

I wondered aloud. "Why does Ukraine allow this Italian man to use their country to get involved with Russia and attack this nation?"

"Italian Admiral Baldassarre Bastico had a long-time love affair with the wife of the Ukrainian prime minister, and she convinced her husband to help the admiral."

I was not surprised to hear this, because I knew the Italian man since he had worked with Richard. And in that time, the mercenary leader also had a relationship with the American president's daughter, and tried to gain access to the White House through the young woman. Even though the president's daughter was married with three children, she and the Italian man had a serious love affair, and eventually, he tried to make her father invade Russia. But when he did not agree, the admiral immediately released a lot of scandal against the American leader and made him lose the election. When the president's daughter found out how she was being used by the Italian man, she immediately broke up with him.

I absorbed all the information Vanya told me, and inquired, "If the Kremlin knows that the Italian man was behind all of the attacks in Russia, why are they still so determined to invade and attack Ukraine?"

Vanya looked bereaved when I asked this question, and after several moments, he answered. "There is one more thing I omitted from telling you. Russia had faced a very serious tragedy recently, and only a handful of government officials know about this. Shortly after the tension with Ukraine began, one of our army generals who was in command of a nuclear storage facility escaped from the country along with fifty nuclear warheads, and soon after, he contacted the premier and threatened to detonate a nuclear weapon over

Russian cities if the parliament did not pass a resolution to attack Ukraine at once. This was a preposterous suggestion, but the man who was blackmailing us was adamant."

"What decision did the premier make?"

"As per his nature, he ignored the threat of the belligerent rogue general. However, exactly one week later, a nuclear bomb detonated over Yakutia, destroying more than eighty square miles of land, and killing thousands of people."

I stifled a gasp, and asked my Russian friend another question. "A nuclear blast was supposed to raise red flags on all international radars and satellite. How come America's NORAD or the NATO command did not register this attack on their dossiers?"

"The Russian government worked very hard to keep this news under wraps, and since the international community was getting suspicious, especially after the New York Times printed a news mentioning that Moscow ordered several thousand zinc coffins. Everyone knew that zinc-lined coffins were used to bury victims of nuclear attacks because those boxes prevent harmful radiation from being released in to the atmosphere. In order to stop foreigners from suspecting what really happened, we released a press statement in which we publicly held a nuclear drill in several main cities. We were able to bring in protective equipment under the ruse, and bury our dead with dignity. We merely told reporters that this was an ordinary drill in case a nuclear warfare in the future. This explanation calmed the western leaders, but we were shaken by the attack. A nuclear bomb detonating over Russia? It was unthinkable, and yet, it happened. So this time, the president said he will not take any more chances, and will listen to the demands of the blackmailer. That was when he ordered the Russian army to be mobilized in the border region. Although this move caused a lot of foreign nations to criticize us, we had to do it. No one else knew what sort of painful dilemma our country was facing, and we could not tell them also. Such was the deadly and sad situation which eventually led us to physically attack Ukraine."

"All this time, everyone in the State Duma was being controlled by the crazy general who ran away with several nuclear weapons?" I said this out loud, in order to comprehend it myself.

Vanya sighed before speaking. "Officially, yes. That was the stance of our leaders. However, my elite private military team employed several world-famous computer specialists, and told them to hack into the computer which the rogue general was using. We were briefly able to track his location to a small villa in Sicily. You will never guess what our reconnaissance drone discovered. The rogue general was meeting with two of the Italian admiral's known mercenary leaders, and they were holding conversation with him. We wanted to strike them with a drone, but moments after getting a signal on his location, our equipment were all jammed by a third party. We realized that the Italian-American mercenary was behind this whole incident. We also tracked an electronic trail, showing that threatening messages were exchanged between one of the mercenaries and the general, and this led us to suspect that the Russian general who was allegedly giving threats and nuking Russia was actually being used or coerced by the Italian man."

"I am wondering what the Italian admiral will gain if Ukraine gets destroyed?"

"Don't you see, that is exactly what the Italian man planned for?" Vanya replied. "He wants the Russian government to kill all Ukrainians, and spend several years fighting them, while he will go ahead and frame several other nations. However, since Russia cannot prove that the Italian man is doing it, they have to invade Ukraine and eliminate the threat of these mercenaries and remove the Ukrainian prime minister from his position of power, since he is chiefly paid by the Italian man and his wife is also a loyal member of the Italian man's team, and has been compromised."

My friend Vanya continued to speak for several minutes, and told me how the Italian man was controlling all Russian aircrafts with his superior hackers, and caused technical failure to make the planes fall from the sky, killing hundreds of Russian pilots and paratroopers. That man also hired specialized actors to make fake videos with phot shopped pictures in which they announce to the world how Russian forces were brutally vandalizing and killing civilians. In order to coax the international community to slap sanctions on Russia, the Italian-American admiral also supplied foreign newspapers with fake text messages and phone call of actors who pretended to be Russian soldiers talking to their families back home. In those messages and phone transcripts, those actors claimed to be Russian paratroopers and insisted that they were only shooting children and women in every single Ukrainian city. Of course, all this information was fake, but NATO and United Nations forces believed in these lies, and continued to increase punitive sanctions on the Russian Federation. My friend spoke urgently but I was only partially hearing what he was saying. It seemed unreal that the country I grew up in was being destroyed from within. I felt alone and helpless.

The prospects of the future of my country seemed more and more dull. I knew the Italian Admiral Bastico would not stop harming Russia. Even if the Russian army was successful in neutralizing Ukraine, I knew that the Italian-American admiral would immediately use the excuse of another nation, such as Uzbekistan, Georgia or Poland to attack Russia again. He would not stop until he had destroyed every city in Russia completely. My fear was so acute that I could not rest or sleep even a moment. Every breath seemed painful, so I decided that I would be able to breathe better if I stayed awake, so I forced myself to consciousness. I was aware I was pushing my brain and that it was failing me. I fought back tears, and tried to come up with an explanation, and solution for my country which was in dire

need for support from the international community. The Italian man along with his mercenaries had launched a massive warfare against this nation, and nothing I could do was stopping him. I contacted my old friends who worked with the Russian Colonel, and one of them who was a senior official in the Duma, agreed to listen to my suggestions. It was a desperate attempt at self-awareness, but one that would give me the confidence to keep trying.

I closed my eyes to momentarily forget about the dangers that were about to fall on Russia. If Ukraine was defeated, another country would be hired, coerced or paid by the Italian American man, and resume attacks on Russia. There was a time, bathed in despondency, when I knelt on the stone road leading to my mother's cemetery, watching with anticipation, the heavy and extended glow of lights and the pirouettes of stars in the sky. It felt vital to sit on the hard ground, and watch the heavens roll by, hoping some good and some positive outcome was to come. I was humbled to be the retainer of such a sight, but I knew it was the rapture before disaster. I knew there may be many more battles heading for my mother's native land, and I wondered how I would handle the greatest disasters.

When I heard about how Baldassarre Bastico was preparing to destroy all remaining vestiges of my mother's native land, and how the Italian man was prepared to make every country in the world turn against Moscow, and obliterate the country from the face of earth, I froze in pain and fear. Never in my wildest, raging, most perilous moments did I imagine Russia would actually be under attack. The government found no other option to deal with the Italian man's double dealings, so they had to launch a swift attack into Ukraine, and in turn, earning the wrath of many other nations, the vast majority of whom were staunchly loyal to the Italian-American man. The prospect of going to sleep, only to wake to heartbreaking news that my nation was under attack, or siege, made my heart stop, and I felt a lonely pain surrounding me, and in vain, I tried to shut this loneliness away but was instead, overwhelmed by momentary understanding that no matter how much I tried, I could never outsmart or overtake the evil planning of the Italian admiral, who was determined to finish what Richard had started. And in the midst of what felt like utter madness and helpless sadness, I cried and cried!

I have known Richard for many years, and I also knew that Baldassarre Bastico was more dangerous than he appears. Since 2005, the Italian criminal had been controlling the infrastructure of the U.S. government, but there were several senators who did not listen to his threats and did not vote for legislation favorable to him. As a result, he had those senators and congressional representatives murdered, but he framed Russian diplomats for those crimes. At that time, the FBI immediately arrested and jailed those diplomats and even threatened to deport their families. This was not the first time the Italian mercenary leader had been using and framing Russian citizens for crimes. One month after the murder of the two aged senators, the Italian was arrested by the US department of homeland security, and they suspected him of being responsible for the assassination of the politicians. The mercenary leader became nervous, and this time, he decided to frame Russians again. It was scheduled for the president to appear before the nation in a State of the Union address, so the Italian man planted a powerful bomb under the podium in order to kill the US president. However, this time, he kidnapped the children of several young FSB operatives and forced them to admit to the FBI that they had tried to kill the American president on the direct order of the Russian leader. Consequently, the federal agents arrested the three women, and interrogated them in secret prisons, but one of the Russian agents eventually admitted that she had been coerced, and her children had been kidnapped in order to force her to give false confessions. When the Italian man heard the surveillance tapes, he had her killed in her cell and showed it as suicide. He released false news stating that the Russian leader was directly responsible for trying to kill the US president. After this scandal broke out, the Kremlin authorized a small team of Special Force men to fly to America and arrest the Italian man for spreading such lies. When the Spetsnaz team arrived in Los Angeles and raided the residence of the Italian man, he and his German friend escaped, and later hunted down the entire Russian team and killed most of them. Only two men survived, but they were badly wounded, and needed medical attention. The Italian man threatened the Border Patrol not to allow any Russian forces to leave the continent, and in order to hide, the Spetsnaz men took shelter at the house of Konstantin Timurovich Bozhinov, a billionaire and a close friend of the Russian president. However, the Italian man did not give up, and chased the Russian agents and tried to break into the Konstantin's mansion, but he was very cautious. He quickly made the two wounded Russian special forces to get on his private plane from a jetport in New York and they were able to escape to Russia. This made the Italian man very angry, and he warned the oligarch that he would seize all his assets in foreign banks. But soon, the oligarch moved back to Russia and relocated his business there. This did not stop the Italian man from targeting all other Russian billionaires and he eventually succeeded in his mission by using EU and UN to cripple and destroy Russian economy through illegal sanctions. The powerful black ops group which was run by several German and Italian criminal leaders had framed the Russian leader for many crimes in the past, and have poisoned opposition leaders and framed the government for it. However, this group now had the best hackers in the world working for them and they were trying to hack into Russian banks in order to liquidate the ruble. The Italian mercenary leader, along with his Austrian friend, had been waging a war against Russian economy ever since they clashed with several wealthy Russian entrepreneurs. They staged numerous attacks on the Russian government using private

contractors and mercenaries who were trained in secret facilities and recruiting stations controlled by mercenaries. They controlled laboratories in Ukraine that were responsible for the deaths of many locals across the border, who fell ill after getting exposed to botulinum toxin, a bioterrorism agent which have previously been produced at a Pentagon bioweapons facility in the US. All the labs in Georgia and Ukraine were controlled by the Italian mercenary leader, who made it his life's mission to destroy Moscow.

I was familiar with several dozen shell corporations which was used by the Italian man in order to funnel money to international mercenary groups.

One of the computer programmers who used to train with me at the Colonel's camp came to my office and told me he had detected several large transactions going in to Ukraine and Russia. When I asked him to look into it properly, he found out that thousands of people were receiving dollars directly from numbered accounts in Switzerland and also unnamed accounts in the banks of the Cayman Islands.

I realized at once that it was the Italian man who was using his accumulated illegal wealth in order to destabilize the region. After investigating the money further, we found that each payment was being wired to individuals in various cities in Russia, and they all accompanied specific instructions. Those who received payment were ordered to do everything in their power to overthrow the Russian government and constantly stage public demonstrations against the leadership, and encourage foreign governments to sanction their homeland. After interrogating many of those demonstrators, the Russian police discovered that they had all been paid hefty sums of money in order to march on the streets. The government officials hoped to halt these people from getting paid by the Italian mercenary and they passed stricter resolutions restricting citizens from receiving money from the mercenary group in order to start social and political unrest in Russia. However, when the Italian man was unable to recruit a large army within the Russian border, he hired thirty thousand experienced veterans and paid them a lump sum of one million dollar each. Those international fighters called themselves the foreign fighting legion of Ukraine, but they were all ordered to breach the Russian border and destroy all the air and military bases inside Russia. The Russian military tried to deter foreign criminals from fighting against them by warning them that all foreign mercenaries, detained in Ukraine, would be brought to justice on criminal charges. The Russian president also repeatedly cautioned the foreign mercenaries to stay away from the homeland, and warned them they would be classified as mercenaries if captured, but since they received so much money from the Italian man, those mercenaries kept coming. For nearly a year, Russia was getting overwhelmed by enemies from all sides. The Italian admiral's objective was to overthrow the present leader and replace him with a puppet president who would allow the mercenaries to control all military and nuclear installations. The Italian-American criminal wanted to seize control of Russia's military arsenal and use it to attack other countries, and frame Moscow for it. Considering that Russia has the largest nuclear stockpile in the world, with 4,477 weapons, it would have been disastrous if this mercenary group were allowed to enter the country and steal all those weapons. The Italian criminal had hoped that in retaliation, those nations would respond with nuclear weapons and destroy all major Russian cities. He had previously detonated a nuclear warhead over Yakutia, which created a massive explosion and killed all civilians who lived in that region. Russian citizens who resided in neighboring areas suffered from busted eardrums, severe concussions and ruptured lungs. Even after the attack on Ukraine commenced, the Italian man and his mercenaries continued to wage a technical and cyber warfare against the Russian military and used hundreds of American army drones to bomb Russian military convoys. Because of the nature of how the ground control station communicates over networks and satellites, even if the Russian soldiers recovered a drone, it was impossible for them to determine where the ground control station or the GCS was, let alone who was flying the drone. That is why they were never able to positively prove that the mercenary was behind these cowardly attacks on army personnel and vehicles. These foreign and European criminal leaders continued to hire thousands of mercenaries in Ukraine, and those handpicked men formed a ruthless local militia who openly professed hate for Russians.

Meanwhile, my friends in the Foreign Intelligence reported to me that the Italian mercenary leaders were bombing hospitals and schools in Ukraine and other Balkan regions in order to frame Russia. They brought in videos and showed the international community that Russian air force was committing these crimes. Naturally, the FSB and military denied ever bombing hospitals, but the Eastern European mercenary leaders immediately kidnapped several Russian officers and forces them to confess false videos to the media, claiming they were ordered to bomb children and kill civilians. However, it was entirely fake propaganda news, yet, no one in the world was prepared to listen to the truth.

It saddened me to see my nation in such a terrible condition, and I was genuinely surprised why the international community refused to have sympathy towards innocent Russian people.

One month later, I was contacted by my Russian friend.

Dustin had discovered something new. It was about the location of another black site.

When Dustin told me that there was a secret CIA prison in Norway, I almost did not believe him. It was impossible! How could a democratic country in Europe allow the Central Intelligence Agency to build torture centers in their country?

I had to investigate the rumor and went directly to Norway.

I met with the head of Norway's Military Center for Terror Analysis, and showed the director some of the gruesome photos of the prisoners who were in other U.S. military controlled black site secret prisons. The Norwegian man was surprised to hear this, and he agreed to help me locate the secret American base, where the Arab prisoners were being held. That afternoon, the director emailed me two separate addresses and a phone number. He said for him, working at the Norwegian Intelligence meant he was able utilize his resources without compromising ethics and contact the American consulate to find out where the secret prison site was. It was fortunate for me, for I immediately went to the secret prison and began to look for ways to break into the huge building.

When I entered the facility in Norway, I saw a frail old man lying in the dark and dirty cell. He could barely speak, but was able to tell me his name. It was Salah bin Mubarak Al Subaie. He was a general in the Yemeni army and he had been a prisoner in this black site for ten years.

I asked the Arab man why he looked so frail and thin, and the Muslim man began to speak slowly. I wept as he described what he had experienced in this European prison. The torture Salah bin Mubarak Al Subaie was experiencing was callous and surreal.

For two months, he was forced to withstand the most sophisticated methods of torture. The masked agents who were interrogating him were not Americans. They were Norwegians, and one was German, but knew English and Arabic. Those European guards locked him in a solitary soundproof room. It was impossible to tell if it was night or day. Salah's only connection to the outside world was a voice that boomed sporadically from an invisible microphone. The prolonged state of sensory deprivation was affecting his cognitive abilities.

One of the prisoners who had blindfolds over his eyes identified himself as the former chief of the Iranian Special Guards Corp. His name was General Majid Bagheri and he was abducted by the mercenaries who was hired by Richard and his secret undercover operatives. General Bagheri said the interrogators at this black site had tortured him and punctured both his eyes, causing him to become permanently blind. I asked him why they tortured him, and he said they wanted to frame him for several nuclear attacks, and ordered him to make a video claiming responsibility for detonating a nuclear warhead over Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. The Iranian general refused to make the false confession video, and he was consequently tortured severely.

Another prisoner who was locked in that black site was Brigadier General Yaqub Khan. He identified himself as a general in the Pakistani army.

General Yaqub Khan had been suspended from his wrist, chained to a rod in the ceilings for thirty hours. His captor ensured the chains were shortened to make it impossible for him to rest. His feet would not touch the ground. Despite excruciating pain in his joints, Khan told me he tried to preserve his energy. His brief efforts of a nap were broken by a shrill whistling sound.

The ordeal was endless, and General Yaqub Khan told me he could not bear to talk about his tortures anymore. I asked him if he knew why he was in this black site, and he told me that several weeks ago, his department came across intelligence reports that proved that an Italian-American naval officer was using thousands of his mercenary men to infiltrate the Pakistani missile bases, and steal nuclear weapons from the Pakistani Defense forces. Yaqub Khan alerted the authorities and tried to stop the group from taking over, and then he found out that they were actually the present-day Taliban, who were planning to take over Pakistan, the same way they took over control of the Afghan government.

General Khan also told me that the captors had already killed his tortured and killed his daughter in front of him, in order to coerce him into making a false confession video, admitting he gave away several live nuclear war head to the Afghan Taliban members.

The interrogators also told him, that they will drop the nuclear weapon on strategic locations in the United States to mark the anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attack on New York, and the new Taliban, which was scheduled to completely take over Kabul before then, would proudly claim responsibility for the attack, but since everyone knew Afghans did not have nuclear weapons, the Pakistani general was scheduled to take the fall for it.

I also found out that the black site held several more prisoners. While rescuing them, I noticed two of the older prisoners were from senior officials of PLA. They were well-known Chinese military leaders. I was surprised to see them locked in this black site, and later found out that the Italian man was framing China for many of the bombings he was carrying out in the United States, and Britain. He was torturing those Chinese officials to force them into admitting that they had done those acts.

After learning of this deadly plot, I immediately alerted my friends at the NSA, DHS, CIA and the FBI and asked them to be on alert for a possible nuclear attack on key location in the United States. I also informed the Capitol police about how the Italian mercenary leader was planning to use a Pakistani made nuclear bomb to detonate over Washington D.C.

I began to search for evidence about who was responsible for building this secret prison, and kidnapping General Salah Al Subaie. After going through the declassified records, I found out that an Admiral by the name of Baldassarre Bastico owned this black site in Norway. He had hired Italian, German and Norwegian mercenary criminals and built this secret prison to kidnap and torture Iranian and Yemeni leaders and military generals.

Twelve hours later, I met with a man who claimed to have information about the whereabouts of this Italian mercenary leader.

"Who are you?" I asked him, when he came. "What are your qualifications?"

"I was the Chief Senior Officer at Pope Air Force Base, near Fayetteville, North Carolina."

"Right, but how do you know this mysterious mercenary leader?"

He spoke broadly. "After I was assigned to the 17th Training Wing at Goodfellow Air Force Base, near San Angelo, Texas, I was contacted by a man who identified himself as a Navy Commander. I later found out he was an Admiral in the United States Military."

"Did you find out his name?"

"Yes, everyone called him Admiral Bastico. Baldassarre Bastico."

"It is an Italian name." I commented.

"It sure is. He never hides the fact that he is originally from Italy. However, we were briefed on a number of clandestine secretive operations, and one man who always accompanied Admiral Bastico was a tall, light-haired fellow, who often spoke in German with his aides. I never got his name nor learned his actual identity."

"Was it this man?" I showed him a mug shot of the German pimp who had been harassing my family, and the military officer nodded vigorously.

After asking him several other questions, I asked him to tell me other details about the Italian man.

"The Italian Admiral had carried out hundreds of attacks inside the United States. He has thousands of people under his employment. For many of the smaller crimes, like the mall and school shooting, he frames white supremist and other racist American groups. For the rest of the crimes, he frames those on Arabs, Russians or Afghans. This time, he targeted multiple locations."

"Is this the first time the Italian criminal planned to bomb an American city?" I asked him

"No, the Italian-American naval commander actually tried to blow up the White House in 2016. During that time, he was having a very serious romantic relationship with the American president's daughter, and was trying to get access to the internal security network through her. He was also planning to bomb the entire Senate building."

"So, what happened then?" I asked. "Was he caught?"

"Not exactly. The Italian man wanted to use his position to get powerful, so he went to Iraq, and paid a group of mercenaries to claim responsibility for the bombing he was planning to give in Washington D.C."

"How did he manage to do that?"

"He made a confession video script in Arabic and made the mercenaries record it. Then he brought the video and saved it in his computer. But we were lucky. One of his girlfriends found the video in his laptop and she alerted the NSA about an impending strike on the White House. The Department of Homeland Security then launched an investigation into the Italian naval commander. Even this time, he started to have an affair with one of the DHS officials who was investigating him in order to get free, but that didn't work for too long. The FBI and DHS was able to capture him, and interrogated him, but he escaped from their custody. He also killed the acting director of Homeland Security in order to avoid recapture."

I returned to one of the CIA safehouses to meet Senaan, an old friend who promised to help me.

Baldassarre Bastico was one of the men Richard trusted most in the world. Richard had hired numerous German and Italian agents to create fake terrorist organizations like the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and he ordered his employees to make a deadly group like Project ISIS, and make everyone in the world think that Muslims are violent.

Mus'ab Senaan, a former Special Collection Service officer I worked with when I first joined the NSA agreed to meet me to discuss an urgent global security issue. When I saw Mus'ab, I knew that something was wrong. He looked very worried.

"Why are you so worried?" I asked him.

Mus'ab told me that he found out that the Italian-American admiral was in Afghanistan, and was using his agents and other ex-Muslims to begin a terrible civil war. I asked him to explain what was happening, and he said that the man who made ISIS terrorist organization was also in Afghanistan, trying to make a group like ISIS and behead innocent people and call themselves Muslims.

I asked Mus'ab. "You did have evidence, that the ISIS group was completely fake?"

Mus'ab nodded. "My agents at the CIA and FBI personally spoke to many Iraqi and Yazidi women who gave CNN and BBC free interviews telling the world how they were sold into slavery for Alla, but the truth is that those women were paid actress, who were offered millions of dollars by the Italian man to make those videos."

I was surprised to hear this. "You are certain about this?" I asked him.

"Yes, my agents asked those women why they agreed to lie on television, and give fake interviews about being raped by Muslim terrorists. They said some American and European men came to visit them and asked them to give interviews on various news channel to pretend to be slaves, and describe how they were assaulted by Muslim men. They received a lot of money for lying to the media. The Italian and American men told them to lie very convincingly, so that everyone who watches those videos are convinced that the Muslims are very bad."

"That is such an evil plotting," I exclaimed.

"Yes, it is, but right now, I am more worried about the current events in Afghanistan."

"Which events?" I asked Mus'ab.

"It is about this new Taliban which is made up of Ex-Muslims and they are instructed to call themselves an Emirate of Jihad, or even Sex-Caliphate like the one this Italian mafia made in Syria and Iraq, during the ISIS project where his priority was to make Muslims appear like a sex-Maniac cult. However, this time, he is moving faster, and is planning to ask the Taliban spokespersons to announce official love-jihad in the Afghan capital."

I asked quickly. "What do you mean by love jihad?"

Mus'ab explained. "It is a term, where these ex-Muslims or other mercenaries who are part of the original Taliban are going to order all Afghan women to offer themselves for prostitution for Alla, and they will claim that their Islamic god ordered them to sell all women as slaves, even though, if they were actually Muslims, they would know that their religion does not allow such things. However, one of the new Taliban's spokesmen is Mullah Eman Gani, but his real name is Peter Najib. He is an ex-Muslim who personally executed fifty Afghan Muslims last year, but now he is claiming to be a Taliban member and even gave an interview where he claimed to have been a prisoner in America's Naval Base in Guantanamo, Cuba. He now controls the new regime's cultural commission and announced that the new Taliban will give all women rights, as long as they agree to become sex slaves. He also said Alla and Muhammad ordered him to force women into prostitution and kill any children who refuses to become child soldiers."

"What are you talking about? I did not hear any announcement about sex jihad or Islamic prostitution."

"Well, then you should watch these videos."

"What are these?" I asked, picking up one of the DVD.

Mus'ab answered. "I confiscated these copies from an archive that was being guarded by those ex-Muslim Taliban men. A Lithuanian national by the name of Augustinas Landsbergis was posing as a Taliban and called himself Delbar Rabbani. He identified himself as the Taliban propaganda minister. And I had the chance of meeting him briefly, but my backup team scouted his residence and recovered caches of evidence. Most of it were DVD and printed articles."

"When did you visit the Lithuanian man?" I asked.

"It was about one year ago, long before these fake Taliban assumed control of the government. The Italian navy guy apparently hired hundreds of women to pose as Taliban sex slaves and record interviews. Around fifty writers also were employed to write and print analysis of how Taliban was terrorizing the country and forcing women into prostitution and ordering all women under sixty to work in Jihadi brothels."

I was shocked to hear this. "You are saying these videos were made while the United States led coalition was still in power?"

"Yes, it was over a year before these Taliban men gained notoriety. The Afghan ex-Muslims who had created this new Taliban was already preparing for this current occupation. However, the reason I asked you to watch these videos, is because they are scheduled to get released every week."

"What exactly is going to be released each week?"

"These ex-Muslims who are now calling themselves Taliban are planning to deliver a copy of these fake interviews and articles to global media, in order to make the world believe that the Taliban are murdering children, mutilating and beheading prisoners and also raping women."

"You have been calling these Taliban leader ex-Muslims. Why is that?"

"Because the people who are roaming around Kabul and other Afghan cities are not Muslims. Many of the leaders are not even native Afghans. Some are from mercenaries from Germany, Latvia, Denmark, England and even the United States. They were hired to pose as Taliban leaders and publicly execute women and children and claim that Islamic Alla told them to do it. Bit going back to your question about the Taliban members who are ex-Muslims. I have verified reports that they have abandoned the Islamic faith many years

ago. Most of them are officially active members of various ex-Muslim groups on social media. Some are regular vloggers who write Islamophobe articles online and also upload YouTube videos in which they openly call for the death of all Muslims."

"But if they are Afghans, then why do they hate their own religion so much?" I asked.

"Don't be naïve," Mus'ab told me. "Did you not know that there are millions of Afghans who are not Muslim? There are thousands of apostates and reverts and they are mostly aligned with the Northern Alliance and war lord factions in Afghanistan. This new Taliban consists largely of those men."

"Did you figure out how these mercenaries took over Afghanistan in less than a week?"

"They had help. Foreign mercenaries working for the German man who was the mastermind of ISIS were busy droning and bombing key locations, allowing these new Taliban to take over the capital."

"I just read a report from the International Committee of the Red Cross. They estimated that thousands had been wounded in fighting with the Taliban."

"That is correct. American made military drones have been pounding the cities, and these Eastern European mercenaries who are posing as Taliban are taking the credit for the killings of all civilians. Of course, they are announcing on camera that Alla and Mahomet told them to kill civilians. But honestly, what worries me right now is that this new Taliban which is comprised of ex-Muslims are planning to take over Pakistan within the next month. Unless we do something drastic to stop them or at least expose the real masterminds, we are going to be in for a huge shock. Because when these ex-Muslims and mercenaries invade Pakistan by land, they will immediately seize the missile depots in Pakistan. And then the Taliban leader will announce that he is the new Nabiin or Prophet, who will nuke all infidels for Alla and Mahomet."

"How can you be so certain these new Taliban leaders are going to take over Pakistan?"

"Watch these satellite footages. It was taken one week ago. You can see the bunkers in the border area. Well, around ten thousand mercenaries are currently in Pakistan. They are naturally dressed in traditional Afghan garb. He will take over Iran using the Taliban, and then he will nuke many countries in Europe framing the Taliban, and show everyone that Taliban are using Pakistani nuclear bombs to nuke America, Russia, and even Germany. This is his ultimate plan, which he thinks will allow him to become the president of the United States."

"He is planning to use the guise of Taliban to create an official Muslim empire, and then he will use it to attack the United States and its allies, and even drop a nuclear bomb over neighboring Uzbekistan or Russia."

"You are missing a key element in your hypothesis."

"Hypothesis? Buddy, you have no idea how serious this situation is, do you? These ex-Muslim members of the Taliban have already made solid plans to enter the Pakistani border."

"When are they planning to invade Pakistan?"

"In a month or so, according to the blue print we seized from their headquarters. The plan is already underway. Several thousand of the mercenaries working for Admiral Bastico are in Pakistan as we speak. They are securing the border area, paving way for the rest of the group to infiltrate into Pakistani soil. According to the video recordings, these European mercenaries and the ex-Muslim Afghans will invade Pakistani, posing as the new Taliban fighters, and will kidnap Pakistani women and girls and force them into sex slavery. We seized hundreds of pre-recorded videos and audio interviews which demonstrated their plans."

"What exactly did you see in those videos?"

"A bunch of Pakistani women wearing Chadri and crying their eyes out. They spoke in Urdu and claimed to be Pakistani nationals. In the video, they are addressing world media and testifying that the Islamic Caliphate of Taliban came to their schools in Pakistan and sold them into sex jihad. This was a strange thing to hear, because the Taliban, whoever they were, were nowhere near the Pakistani border. They still are not. So, we knew this was a hoax, so we searched for the actual identity of those women who starred in those tapes."

I asked again. "Were you able to identify those women?"

"Yes, we did," Mus'ab said. "Our data collections team identified the women who spoke in the Taliban slavery video. They are mostly actors. Some are Pakistanis, but others are Afghan and Indian amateur actress. We did identify a famous Indian actress in one of the videos, where the alleged victim was crying, and displaying an amputee, missing both arm and legs. When we contacted the Indian actress, she admitted starring in that video, but insisted it was a simple acting gig, and the directors assured her it was going to be part of a historical film. That actress had no idea she was being hired to make a video about the Taliban sex caliphate. However, three of the Pakistani women we tracked down lived in Karachi. They admitted starring in the slavery video playing victims of an imaginary Taliban. When we asked them why they were willing to pose in compromising videos that showed them getting beaten by bearded men and then being beheaded, the women confessed that they were also ex-Muslims, and had founded a group in Pakistan called the Ex-Muslim of Asia."

"So, the whole thing was a sham? All the interviews, all these women claiming to be slaves of the sex jihadis, and the women who is shown as being beheaded?"

"Obviously. I mean, the Taliban did not even take over Afghanistan when this video was made, let alone Pakistan."

"But, why does this group find so much interest in Pakistan? They have gone to such lengths to make it appear as though the sex jihad caliphate is real, and that they are a group like the ISIS."

"One of the facts that we know for certain is this Italian Admiral is leading this group."

"You mean this new Taliban?"

"Yes, this new group which is entirely made up of the ex-Muslim community of Afghanistan, as well as a few thousand heavily trained mercenaries working directly under the Italian officer. He also hired several thousand villagers to do mundane tasks, like walking around the streets waving sub-machine guns, and shooting a few women or children. Those poor Afghans are offered money and drugs in exchange for their cooperation."

"I understand this Italian-American military leader wants to become president, but how do you explain the activities of Taliban's 50,000 troops that have retaken Afghanistan in two weeks, with cities falling like dominos and residents fleeing. Around ten thousand of the Taliban members of mercenaries working directly under the command of the Italian man. The remaining fifty or sixty thousand Afghans are all ex-Muslims who chose to leave their original faith of Islam, and are now eager to make the Muslim Afghans suffer."

"It sounds like the German guy who made ISIS."

"Yes, but you should know that ISIS was not created by one man. Richard was instrumental in making sure it received publicity, but it was the German man and this Italian-American admiral who personally oversaw the day-to-day functioning and logistics of Project ISIS. They wanted to expand the group and use their mercenaries to officially seize power in Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, but their ambitious plans were cut short when Russia intervened."

"After the German guy made ISIS, and had plans for ISIS to take over at least twenty countries in the Middle East region. This was one of the main reason the Italian mob boss organized the Arab spring. He wanted to extend ISIS all the way to Africa, Egypt and other countries. But he was forced to change his plans after Russia got involved."

"When did this mercenary group start their mission?" I wanted to know.

"This group had been in the making since 1990, when a shady group rose to power in Afghanistan, and called themselves the Taliban. They began to enact harsh rules such as, ultraconservative views, which included severe restrictions on women as well as public stoning of children and amputations and beheadings. They had orders to claim responsibility for the September 11 attacks in 2001, so that the United States would have a pretext to invade Afghanistan, and right before they were ousted by the U.S-led invasion, those men who pocketed millions of dollars maintained till the end that they are Islamic extremists called the Taliban.

But he had to stop it because Russia intervened in Syria and the FSB found out about it."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Will people even believe it? This whole charade sounds so fake."

"Why wouldn't they believe it? People are very simple-minded. They believed that ISIS was a real terrorist cell. He wants people to kill Muslims so he wants to do all the nukes and bombing framing on this Taliban Emirate Caliphate, and make it into something like the ISIS."

ANN Chief International Correspondent conducted a live interview of a fake Taliban leader who claimed to be the commander of the militia faction. The Taliban commander said all women should be sold as slaves to their fighter, and should conduct love jihad or sex jihad for Alla. That commander is actually Arrigo de' Stefani, an Italian pretending to be Mullah Wais Zakhilwal. In the span of one week, Arrigo de' Stefani, aka Mullah Wais Zakhilwal gave over eleven interviews, claiming to be a messenger of Alla, and swearing to uphold sex jihad commandments all over Afghanistan."

I tried to process the information in my head, so I asked, "Did you try talking to regular Afghan national who are part of the Taliban group?"

"Yes, we did, and most of them admitted to working for Italian admiral and pretending to be Taliban, in exchange of money. Many are Afghan ex-Muslims, and they admitted that this new Taliban chose August 22, to be their rebirth, in order to celebrate the Apostasy Day. They are happy to kill any actual Muslims and are using drones to shoot them."

"I am still curious about how you discovered those pre-recorded videos?"

"In addition to hundreds of testimonies from female actress posing as victims of this new Taliban regime, we also recovered many audio recordings, possibly made to appear as phone messages, that have excerpts of Afghans trying to seek safety from the rising Taliban."

"But those recordings were made before the Taliban came into power, correct?"

"One year prior to these events, yes. The videos were mostly produced in a studio that is controlled by this mercenary group. Those fake video and testimonies cover in details how in the wake of the withdrawal of U.S. troops, Afghan women and children had become traumatized because the Taliban beat them to death and mutilated the bodies of their children."

"Why would someone say something like that?"

"I am merely recounting some of the bizarre narratives that we found that was pre-recorded in that studio. Apparently, the videos were to be released gradually to various news outlets, and systematically help this Italian man establish a reputation for his group, which of course, he calls Taliban, except none of his employees or fighters are actually Afghan Muslims. They are mostly mercenaries, former Special Forces and black ops agents, and thousands of Eastern European assassins and contractors." Senaan paused. "The funny thing about these videos is that there are eyewitness accounts that confirm each of the alleged slavery and mutilation stories. For example, in one village near Kabul, a young woman weeps in the video and claims her ninety-year-old mother was raped and beaten to death by the Taliban fighters who later burned their home and said they did this crime to please Islamic Alla and Mahomet. I don't think the media got their hands on a copy of those videos yet, but it seems that each day, one of these stories that I have here is getting aired."

"Why can't you just track the person who is releasing the pre-recorded events and video testimonies? That way, we will know who was behind this entire charade."

"Eighteen months before the sudden collapse of Afghanistan's government and the resurgence of the Taliban, this Italian guy was already busy establishing his base in Afghanistan."

"Why did he choose Afghanistan?"

Senaan sighed. "Easy. Because he had pre-established contacts here. He goes back all the way to 1989. Richard was very interested in that region and Baldassarre Bastico who was not even a U.S. citizen then, was one of the most trusted associates of Cynthia's father."

"Baldassarre Bastico. He was born in Italy. But came to America as a teenager and learned English very well. Bastico was one the first black ops operative that Richard sent overseas. Richard sent Bastico to Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan war, and orchestrated a delicate plan, where he used NSA undercover operatives to create a mercenary group, which we now know as Taliban. Richard placed the Italian man in charge of the program, and he personally armed those Afghans so that they could kill as many Russian soldiers as they could."

"What was Richard's interest in Afghanistan?"

I am afraid it was related to you, at least, to a certain extent. He hated you at that time. And you were Russian. Richard did what he always does, and wanted to destroy your country. His original plan was to pulverize the entire Soviet Union, but fortunately he failed to do that."

"If Baldassarre Bastico was an Italian national, then how did he become such a high ranking American military commander?" I asked again.

"Oh, Richard had connection in important places in both Washington and Langley. He arranged for false identity papers that finally enabled Bastico to join the United States Military under an assumed name. He rose in ranks very quickly and neutralized anyone who found out about him. Creating Taliban in the eighties was Richard's idea, but Bastico's handiwork." Senaan stopped speaking. "Now, his mercenaries seized control of Kabul on Sunday in the wake of America's withdrawal, and the finale to its 20-year military operation."

"But why would someone go through all this trouble, in creating a fake Taliban group, and then try to frame bombings on them? For what reason?"

"I might be able to help you answer that," my friend replied. "For the past two years, this Italian dude has been working with Bruno Grünewälder, a Hungarian mercenary, and they have been planning on how to destabilize the U.S. government and seize control of the White House. This was the reason why he has been so zealous about orchestrating mass shooting, and the CIA found evidence that he and his operatives seized weapons from several military bases in Idaho, and Oregon and distributed them to thousands of individuals, many of them who were mentally imbalanced, and he facilitated these shooting to make it look natural. He was hoping to use it to overthrow the government using his position in the military, and execute a coup in the United States. He is Italian, after all, and his family has ties to the Mafia, so I am not too surprised he thought he could take over the United States this way. But his shooting operations were not too successful, so he decided to resurrect the Taliban, and paid a bunch of ex-Muslim Afghans some money to pose as Jihadi fighters and take over the entire country. But the main plan is to use the Taliban to breach the borders of Pakistan and to steal nuclear war heads, which Bastico will then use to detonate over the United States."

"He will nuke his own country?" I gasped.

"Well, he was not born here, so I doubt he feels America is his country. And secondly, from what I know about this man, he will do anything to become the president of the United States. Hence, I hear about his latest plan of dropping a nuclear weapon in Washington D.C. on the eve of the September 11 anniversary."

"It is not so easy to become the president," I pointed out. "Even if he drops a nuke, why should anyone vote him into power?"

"I think his plan is to eliminate the line of succession, and somehow staging a military coup after declaring a state of emergency."

"This sounds like a nightmare," I sighed. "But you wanted to tell me about the new Taliban. What are they up to?"

"The popular narrative is that these Taliban members are killing people for become apostates, when in reality, none of the Taliban fighters who are roaming the streets are actual Muslims. Some are real Afghans, but they are all ex-Muslims, and are loyal members of various ex-Muslim groups and clubs."

I nodded. "But they are now calling themselves the Muslim Emirate."

"Yes, that is what the ISIS cult called themselves in Iraq, and Syria as well. It is how the Italian Admiral acts. He likes to move in circles, so as soon as he was caught giving all the thousands of shootings in the United States, he realized he could not overthrow the American government by merely distributing guns to mentally disturbed individuals, but he decided to move to a different level."

"So, what is his new plan?" I asked. "How does bringing a fake Taliban into power help him become the president of the United States?"

"Bastico hired around five hundred linguists to dress in traditional Islamic garbs and speak in Pashtun. Their job is to pose as Taliban fighters and leaders and announce on the Afghan state television, that they will wage war on the United States as revenge of what they did to their country." The former NSA operative sighed. "This is the reason why you will see that most of the imposters who are holding the leadership position in the fake Taliban is claiming to be former prisoners of CIA black sites and the Guantanamo military detention facility in Cuba, but the narratives are all false. I checked with the Pentagon, and those men had never been in American custody. Most of them are not even Afghan. Facial recognition software confirmed that they are actually mercenaries from Eastern Europe, Italy, Germany, and Lithuania."

"So, it was a show?"

"The rapid collapse of the former Afghan government over a single weekend was carefully orchestrated by this Italian-American Navy commander. He and his German cronies paid billions of dollars to the Afghan president, and military leader in order to persuade them to flee in an orderly manner, and show the world media that this new Taliban means business. I heard unverified reports that the Afghan government officials and bureaucrats received so much money from the Italian man, that they could not even transport the money with them. Some of them left hundreds of millions in untraceable currency behind."

"Why would the German and Italian mercenaries pay these legitimate government officials, cash? Why not transfer the money to them electronically?"

"Good question. I think it was to avoid detection by the IMF, and the U.S. Treasury. They did not want it to be too obvious that the entire Taliban takeover was a charade, in which his European mercenaries were merely posing as Taliban fighters, and killing anyone who was a member of the original Muslim Taliban."

"So, you are certain that this no one in this Taliban is Muslim?" I wanted to clarify.

"Not even one. I did find several ex-Muslims, who had reverted years ago, and man, do they hate other Muslims. This new Taliban consists of members who are all former Muslims who had become atheists or agnostics, and some even converted to Christianity or Hinduism, but they are paid by the Italian mafia commander to dress as traditional Taliban fighter and identify themselves as Muslims."

"But even if they are a group of Eastern European mercenaries, how did they ever seize political power so quickly?"

"They had the support of U.S.-supplied firepower, such as guns, ammunition, helicopters and more. But most importantly, they had the full backing of the Italian American Naval commander, who used American drones to bomb Afghan cities and government buildings in an effort to force them to concede to the new ex-Muslim Taliban. This new Taliban leaders have strict orders to execute anyone who is a Muslim and tries to join Taliban."

"Who gave the Taliban this order?"

"Who else? Bruno Grünewälder and Admiral Bastico."

My heart hardened at the thought of how the Italian man was planning to murder millions of Americans in a coordinated nuclear attack.

My friend Dustin had been conducting a side investigation into Richard and one week later, he called me to his computer lab to tell me what he had discovered.

Dustin said he kept a tab on my travel itinerary and noticed that in the last few years, each time I visited my mother's burial place in Southern Russia, Richard had hired two of his trusted black ops mercenaries to spy on me.

I was terrified to hear this news. This meant my secret was not safe. If Richard had me followed all the way to Grozny, he must have found out all the details about the family members I had in the Caucasus region. My mother's cousins and other relatives were residing there. But most importantly, I was devastated to hear that the family graveyard I had placed my mother to rest was desecrated by aerial bombardment.

After some deep contemplation, I reluctantly made the decision to move my mother's remains from the dilapidated London cemetery to her birthplace in Grozny, so she could spend her eternity with her deceased parents and grandparents. But my plans were awfully flawed, because, despite taking so many precautions, my enemies discovered the location of my mother's family, and destroyed that place.

Dustin also showed me authenticated communiqué that went directly from Richard's NSA office to Kremlin, where he persuades State Duma leaders to bombard certain villages and cities near Grozny. The cable spelled out an ultimatum that suggested that if the Russian officials disobeyed his commands, he would expose sensitive state secrets to the world media.

Moscow caved in to his demands and the military agreed to bomb and kill tens of thousands of civilians in Southern Russia. In a single aerial attack, my mother's hometown was completely destroyed. All her family members, every last living relative of mine was dead. There was no one else in this world who had my mother's blood running through their veins.

I terribly regretted ever moving my mother's burial place to Chechnya. Somehow, I believed if I never moved her there, this war would not have taken place. And all my mother's relatives would not have died in vain.

It was later that year, I came across some damning information. The former head of Poland's Committee for Public Security contacted me personally, because he was one of my instructors at the KGB Colonel's training camp.

The man said he received a report that some unidentified maritime agents were operating from a network of artificial island bases in the South Baltic Sea. It was an aggressive gesture, and the Russian Navy decided to be cautious and deployed large numbers of strategic bombers in a maritime role, including activating special submarines in the Baltic and Black Sea, with nuclear-armed vessels patrolling the remote corners of Russia's western Arctic. Those submarines were armed with nuclear warheads and travelled at high speeds and operated with reactor technology. The flurry of movement beneath the Arctic caused the American Navy to scramble its own ships and alert the U.S. submarines in the Atlantic Ocean.

I once asked a colleague what was the purpose of parading those giant ships and submarines, because it could be misread as an act of aggression. But he said the U.S. government knew the primary role of these anti-missile aircraft was to protect the Soviet mainland from attacks by U.S. carrier task forces, and as long as they remained vigilant, rival parties would feel discouraged to engage irresponsibly. The U.S. Department of Defense knew that the general purpose of those underwater patrols was data collection. These submarines often intercepted NATO's lines of communication across the North Atlantic Ocean between Europe and North America, and this way, Russian leaders made sure the world remained peaceful.

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The news about a fake terrorist group posing as the Taliban and occupying Afghanistan was very shocking to me.

I found all of this very difficult to believe, so I enlisted the help of my friend Cuthbert. He had worked in the State Department for many years and would be able to tell me the truth about what was going on.

So, without wasting time, I phoned Cuthbert and asked him what he knew about Admiral Bastico.

Cuthbert began to tell me a lot of details about that Italian man. I learned that Admiral Baldassarre Bastico has been working for Richard since 1980. Although Bastico was born in Italy, he lived in America and spoke fluent English, and after joining the United States Military, he worked in the Intelligence Department and met Richard. The two men started to create covert groups of terrorists, and began to give numerous bombings, and framed other nations for it.

I told Cuthbert to give me an example to he pointed out how in recent times, Admiral Baldassarre Bastico decided to take revenge on several Saudi princes for not giving in to his blackmail, so he hired mercenaries to set base in Yemen, and use advanced drone mechanisms to launch deadly strikes into Saudi Arabia and the royal Saud family palaces. Bastico told the Saudi Royal family that the Yemeni rebels were launching those missiles at them, and he will protect them, but in reality, it was the navy commander who was giving these attacks.

I quickly asked my friend. "Why did the media claim that the Yemeni rebels who are attacking Saudi Arabian cities are ISIS members?"

"The Italian criminal hired experts to launch explosive-laden drone towards the Saudi cities. Although the people doing these crimes are actually Eastern European mercenaries, the Saudi-led coalition believes they are fighting Yemen's Houthi group, but the Yemenis are framed by Richard and his men."

"I knew Richard was partially behind the funding of this terrorist organization called ISIS," I told my friend.

Cuthbert agreed. "Both Richard and his Italian employees use ISIS as a front for all their terrorist activities. That is why they created this fake group, and made their highly trained agents and mercenaries pose as ISIS fighters in videos. For example, in one of the famous ISIS beheading videos, Bastico hired a British assassin to pose as an ISIS militant who called himself "Jihadi John" and executed and tortured innocent people on camera. Another Irish special forces operative was hired by Bastico to show lots of videos where he beheads American and Russian citizens. That Irishman also used a nickname Jihadi Beatles."

"I heard about those Jihadi characters on television and news. But one thing still does not make any sense," I said.

"What does not make sense to you?" Cuthbert asked me.

"According to a news report from one month ago, the British ISIS fighter who called himself "Jihadi Beatles" was recently arrested in England and was transported to the United States for a public trial."

"Yes, it was this trial in court that I was thinking about."

"You mentioned that the Beatles Jihadi fighter was an agent working for the Italian criminal, but if he was a British operative posing as a militant, why was he placed on trial?"

Cuthbert answered patiently. "Both Richard and Bastico are very thorough. They paid their agents millions of dollars to get arrested and go to court. Their job is to sit in front of a jury and tell them how they killed innocent people for Alla and Mahomet and that they are proud to be ISIS fighters."

"What happens when these fake terrorists are arrested by real police?"

"Bastico ordered his ISIS agents to be arrested intentionally, so they could be flown to the United States to face trial on terrorism charge. Inside the court, those Italian and German criminals swear that they are ISIS terrorist who kill people for Alla and Mahomet, and then the jury or the judge becomes eager to pronounce a guilty verdict."

"And after the court sentences them?" I asked.

"Once the court sentences them, Bastico promised to rescue those fake terrorists from prison after a few months or several years."

"That is such a messy scenery," I commented. "I hope we can finally put a halt to all these terrorist organizations."

"We might be able to stop them," Cuthbert replied. "Especially since we learned so much about them already."

I asked. "How do you know so much about this group?"

"Because I have been keeping close tabs on your girlfriend and her stepfather."

"What did you find out?" I asked again.

"Cynthia's stepfather has been building this terrorist group since 1990, and he sent this Italian mafia guy over to Kabul hundreds of times since. He had always planned to use Taliban to a front or a cover story for all the bombing that he intended to give. So, he and Bastico went to Afghanistan and paid hundreds of drug dealers and war lords and other ex-Moslem Afghan factions, and paid them to take credit for all the crimes he had carried out, including the one he did on September 11, 2001, on New York City."

"What about the recent chaos in the mountainous country?"

"The recent bloodshed in Afghanistan are largely due to the remote-controlled energy bombs the Italian man have been detonating constantly. He is blowing up Afghan cities, and other populated areas, and is trying to show the world that the Taliban are doing it."

"What would he actually gain by demonizing the Afghans?"

"This Italian dude wants to seize power in the United States, and ultimately become the president."

"I understand, a lot of people want to become the president, but how is Afghanistan related to it?"

Cuthbert replied. "Our sources confirmed that the Italian man was involved in a very close romantic relationship with the American president's daughter, and he used her to gain access to the White House and other national secrets."

"The president's daughter?" I gasped in surprise. "You are talking about the blonde and stylish fashion designer who worked with her father at the White House?"

"The very same."

"Why did this Italian navy commander get into a relationship with her? Isn't she married?" I asked.

"Admiral Baldassarre Bastico wanted to get close to her and get access to her father," Cuthbert explained. "He was hoping to have the president impeached, or ruin their reputation, but somehow, the president's daughter found out about his true sinister intentions, and broke up with him."

"What did he do after that?" I asked.

"He was very angry. I read reports that he immediately tried to take revenge on her for breaking up, and stole nearly a billion dollar from her clothing and fashion industry. He also gave many false cases against the president and his family members. But ultimately, the president's daughter was able to get away from him permanently."

"How is Richard related to this Italian guy?" I asked.

"The Naval commander is still working for Richard, but he carries out all his terrorism related activities such as making the Taliban on his own. Right now, the greatest sham the Italian man is playing is building a fake group called the Taliban, which he code named the Lethal Unit. The Italian admiral and his German colleagues are using German and Dutch computer hackers to pose as Taliban fighters, and they are using energy bombs to detonate explosives over Afghan civilians, and uploading videos where fake Taliban leaders take responsibility for all of those crimes. The Italian man also paid his mercenaries to wear turban and tunics, and kidnap women, and cut off their ears and nose, and tell the media that Moslem Afghans are violent. Those women are also ordered to give fake interviews about how they were tortured by religious extremists, but in reality, none of the Taliban fighters are Moslems. They are all mercenaries, and some are ex-Moslems, who abandoned their original Islamic faith voluntarily."

I was still in touch with Cynthia, and she pleaded with me to behave gentle with her stepfather for he was ill.

Richard had a very generous heart, and despite occasional stern rebuke towards me and harsh discipline with Cynthia, he never failed to invite me for lavish meals at expensive restaurants. However, after Cynthia and I spoke to him about moving out to a house of our own, Richard shouted so much that I thought he had started to hate me for taking his daughter away from him, but I had misjudged him, because he again invited me to a very posh eatery in Uptown. I was grateful and wore a new pair of shirt for the occasion. Cynthia was enjoying the delicious cuisines, and it made me pleased to see this lovely family gathering going so smoothly. While the waiters were serving us desserts, I noticed four police officers weaving through the restaurant, checking the faces of all the customers. I realized they were searching for someone specific, but what kind of fugitive would be foolish enough to sit in a public area? I resumed my meal, savoring every morsel of the peach pie that was placed before me. Then a voice spoke sharply above my head, and a heavy pair of hands rested firmly on my shoulders. I glanced up to see the policemen staring at me accusingly. They asked for my identification card, and then declared that I was under arrest for the rape and murder of a young woman named Janica. My mind buzzed in confusion. I knew Janica! She was Cynthia's college roommate who came to her birthday party. I never saw that woman for more than two minutes, and we merely exchanged brief hello. I had no idea why the policemen thought I was guilty.

One of the policemen asked everyone at the table if they knew me well. And Richard immediately told them I was Russian. As soon as they heard this, anger flashed in their eyes, and they shouted curses at me and grabbed my arms so forcefully, that I cried out in pain. One of the policemen sneered and said all Russians are criminals and terrorists. I protested and told him not to be so prejudiced, but this made the police even more angry and he banged my head on the dining table. My breathless pain culminated as I spoke, and I had to visibly collect myself, keeping my eyes downcast and breathing deeply as I tried to pull my head back up to continue the discourse. I was worn and tired from carrying the burden of speaking against the racist, dominant and obscurantist narrative. My emotional plea was ignored even as I suggested that it was wrong to blame Russia for my individual flaws, and that such dehumanizing act of violence against Russians in Europe and the United States is blatantly unjust. I experienced the churning, excruciating frustration of a victim that was seen by all but heard by none.

They grabbed me, and twisted my arm roughly behind my back, and kicked me facedown to the ground. I shouted and protested my innocence, and told the police they made a mistake. I was innocent, I cried out to Cynthia, begging her to believe me, but the police warned me to remain silent. I did not care that the police thought I was guilty, but when Cynthia stared at me in horror, my heart shattered to pieces. I knew she did not believe my words. How could she think I would rape and kill her friend? How?! I ceased struggling and the police dragged me away. To my utter humiliation, I saw that all the other customers pushed aside their dinner plates and tossed dirty looks in my direction. They all thought I was a lowly criminal who hurt women. The two hours I spent being processed in the police precinct was like a terrible nightmare. Never before had I faced more sorrow. I was being branded as a sex offender, and a killer. My beloved Cynthia did not trust me anymore. What use was this life to me?

These terrible dark thoughts coursed through my brain, and I remained awake the entire night in the jail cell, hoping I would die before daybreak.

My eyes briefly closed when a key rattled. A guard told me to leave.

I did not protest, and hurried to the checkout area to gather my belongings. Richard was waiting for me there.

I was tremendously pleased to see him. Richard apologized for not speaking in my defense the previous night during my arrest, but he promised to help me, and said he paid one million dollars in bond money for my bail payment. He also promised to hire the best lawyers in American to represent me in court, but he gently asked me to stay away from Cynthia since she was convinced of my guilt. I

was immensely grateful to him but did not want to believe that my beloved Cynthia would believe in such a preposterous charge against me, so after Richard dropped me to my small boathouse, I immediately phoned Cynthia to tell her I was out of jail. But no matter how many times I phoned her, Cynthia refused to answer my calls. I realized she really thought I was actually guilty.

Two days later, I was contacted by another colleague who was working with the Department of Homeland Security. He asked me: "Do you remember the Italian-American army officer who was wreaking havoc during the Iraq war?"

I replied instantly. "Yes, isn't he the Navy commander who works for Richard and personally carried out several terroristic attacks on behalf of Cynthia's father is known as Admiral Baldassarre Bastico."

"That man was the worst American who ever existed."

"Wasn't he Italian?"

"Bastico was born in Italy, but he lived in America since he was a teenager and spoke fluent English."

"How did he end up joining the United States Military?" I asked him.

"He joined the Navy and later worked in the Intelligence Department and met Richard. The two men did various missions together and started to create covert groups of terrorists, and were responsible for numerous bombings, which they always framed others people or nations for it. Do you remember the twin bomb explosions in Madrid?" He asked me.

"The suicide bombing that took place three years ago? I remember that several hundred people died in Spain in that attack."

"Yes, the official police report was that a suicide bomber blew up a truck near a supermarket in Madrid. Do you know what Interpol discovered after conducting their own investigation?"

"What did they find?" I inquired.

"They saw that the attack was a frame job, and an innocent man was handcuffed to the van's steering wheel, and the explosives were detonated with a remote-control device."

"But who was actually behind the bombing?" I wanted to know.

"Richard and his Italian friend personally carried out the attack." The DHS man responded.

"Why did they blow up a van in Madrid and kill so many innocent people?"

My friend replied. "Admiral Baldassarre Bastico was stationed at the Moron Air Force Base at Moron De La Frontera, when he tried to assassinate the king of Spain, but the Spanish police suspected him, and even arrested him several times. However, he escaped from prison and wanted to take revenge on Spain, so he personally orchestrated the bombing of Madrid, but framed an innocent man for it."

"How did he do it?" I asked.

"He handcuffed the man to the steering wheel of the van, so that it would appear as though it was a suicide bombing carried out by ISIS or Taliban. But in reality, it was an attack given by this Italian-American man."

"I knew he was behind the bombings in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but what did he do recently?" I asked.

My colleague replied. "He also paid Chinese military officers and generals millions of dollars, so that they would let him and his agents stay inside China and blow up Chinese military and nuclear facilities."

"I don't understand why he would want to do that." I said worriedly.

"It is a long story, but this charade has been playing for many years. This Italian-American naval officer had been visiting China since 2004."

"Why?" I asked.

"The People's Liberation Army in China was controlled by their Communist government for many years, and they naturally suppressed religious people or those citizens, who displayed or expressed their faith in public." The man from DHS told me. "American media had reported, that for nearly ten years, the Communist government in China banned Moslems from publicly covering their bodies with Islamic clothes, and the government also forbade men from praying in Mosques. Public call to prayer five times a day was forbidden in China, due to the government's communist beliefs. However, even though the Chinese government was oppressing and harassing Moslems, they did not kill, execute or imprison all of the ethnic Turkic or Chinese Moslems who lived in the border cities in Xinjiang or Hong Kong."

"Really?" I was shocked to hear this.

"Yes, but it was before the Chinese communist government became the latest victim to the Italian-American navy commander." My colleague told me. "The military commander, who numerous CIA operatives were looking for, was popularly known as the admiral of the Naval force in the United States Military. I did some research on his background and found out his name was Baldassarre Bastico. He was born in Italy but moved to the United States at the age of nineteen. After moving to America, Bastico lived with his family in

Boston, where his uncles and other relatives owned a small pizza store. According to sealed State Department files, I discovered that Baldassarre Bastico and his family were members of the notorious Italian mafia, but after he began to work for Cynthia's stepfather, Richard made sure that Bastico's criminal records were expunged permanently. Baldassarre Bastico joined the military and used his army salary to pay for his college tuition, and after graduating, he advanced in the ranks of the military and became a high-ranking officer in the United States Navy. Recently, he reached the coveted position of becoming a fully decorated Navy Admiral."

"I know about this man's background," I interrupted him. "He is one of the most trusted agents of Richard."

"That is true. Since the start of 2004, the Italian man who called himself Admiral Bastico began to travel frequently to China, and met with hundreds of Chinese journalists and reporters, and he told other Chinese media outlets that ethnic Turcic Moslems would soon attack mainland China and kill lots of innocent people. However, the Chinese military and PLA officers did not believe this, because they knew the Moslem community in China was a very peaceful group, who never did any violence towards anyone. The Admiral was angry to see that Chinese officials were not believing him, so he immediately launched a series of deadly attacks on Chinese military intelligence buildings and hardware factories. Admiral Bastico had planned to steal vital technology from the Chinese military and use the data to build his own weapons arsenal and ultimately sell those weapons to criminals who would pay him hefty sums for the ammunitions. But before stealing from the Chinese military, the Admiral knew he had to frame someone for his crime, so he immediately began a lengthy preparation to blame all of his attacks on the Moslem community who lived in China or were residents of the neighboring Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan. He met repeatedly with several senior Chinese politicians and told them that Moslem Turks would soon blow up many Chinese factories and kill a lot of people. In reality, Baldassarre Bastico personally wanted to attack those Chinese secret facilities, so he took a team of his black ops expert men and raided sixteen separate Chinese scientific labs and military research centers. He seized valuable plutonium cores from two Chinese nuclear research facility, and blew up the entire structure prior to leaving. The Italian man also stole the data drives from the computer hardware in a Chinese software company."

"The thievery was discovered by the Chinese government the next day, and an international man hunt was underway for a group of foreigners who were seen near the Chinese laboratory, science facility and nuclear research center. The Italian admiral informed the Chinese police that the Turk Moslems who lived in Xinjian Autonomous region blew up all of the sixteen government buildings, but the Chinese police said they found no evidence to support that claim. However, the Italian man immediately ordered his assistants to frame at least two hundred Moslem families, and broke into their houses and left documents and other items that were stolen from the Chinese labs and research facilities, so when the Chinese police raided the houses of those innocent Moslems, they found many stolen items. They did not know that the Italian commander left it there to frame them, so the Chinese government ordered the arrest of nearly one million Moslems in China's eastern state."

"But the Chinese intelligence agencies are not stupid. They must have suspected that the Italian man was responsible for all the attacks in China."

"The Chinese military intelligence did become suspicious so the demanded more evidence from this Bastico. But after the government began to arrest Moslems, the Italian admiral kidnapped one of the daughters of an American Army General and told him if he did not call the Chinese military leader and tell him that ethnic Moslems in China were responsible for all the attacks and bombings that took place in the laboratories and factories in China, then he would never see his daughter again. The American general quickly made the dreaded phone call and assured the unsuspecting Chinese leaders that the Moslems in China were behind the explosion of all their military labs and nuclear facilities. This piece of information made the politicians of the communist country very angry and the Chinese communist leaders wanted to punish Moslems even more. This time, they ordered the state officials to build giant concentration camps. They began to arrest tens of thousands of Moslems and locked them up inside horrible concentration camps."

"The Communist leaders in China also arrested one million Uighur Moslems and began to torture them, and force some to abandon the religion of Islam."

In 2006, two passenger trains derailed in the Beijing Metro station, and several simultaneous explosions took place across Shanghai and Zhengzhou, and the Chinese government was clueless as to who were committing this mass but sophisticated murders. Each of those terrorist attacks were blamed on the Turcic and Uighur Moslems who lived in the Eastern parts of China. The Italian admiral who was serving in the American military, immediately called all the Chinese political leaders and told them that all the bombings that happened in China was done by Moslems who lived in Xinjiang and Beijing. But, the truth was the Italian admiral hired European criminals to blow up the Chinese train station and ordered his employees to frame Moslems for it, because he wanted the Chinese government to kill all the Moslems in China."

I inquired. "What did the Chinese government do after they believed Moslem Turks were attacking them?"

My colleague responded evenly. "Within five years, the Chinese communist party members arrested or killed two million Moslems in China, and locked up more than ten million innocent people. Their only crime was that they believed in one God and called

themselves Moslem. In this frenzy, thousands of Moslems each week died and private organ harvesting agencies tried to sell their body organs, such as liver, kidney, heart and eyes to transplant patients in the United States and Britain. The Chinese government officially denied carrying out so many executions, but independent research showed that only thirty people in the entire country of China had signed up to have their organs donated after death. The remaining hundred thousand organs are forcibly harvested from Moslem prisoners in the Xinjian region of China. Turkic Moslems in those areas were not allowed to fast in the holy month of Ramadan, and neither were they permitted to own or read Koran. Some Chinese Communist policemen raped the women, and stayed in their houses to make sure they did not become fundamentalist."

"How could such things happen in this century?" I exclaimed.

"All of these terrible crimes were happening because one Italian criminal decided to carry out massive acts of terror, and hired Dutch and German assassins to kill innocent people and blame it on the Moslems, but the Chinese government knew that all the Moslems in China were not evil. Many Moslems in China were dying each day because of their injuries. But the Chinese communist government claimed that they are doing this to make sure these civilians don't turn into extremists."

"How do you know all these details about those Chinese Uighur prisoners?" I asked him.

"I was able to speak to a few prisoners who managed to escape the Chinese prison camps, and they said they were being abused and tortured every day. Moslems in Chinese concentration camps were banned from praying and fasting, and were forced to drink alcohol and eat pork daily, since Moslems, are not allowed to eat pork in their religion." The man from the Department of Homeland Security answered.

"I wish I knew why they were doing this," I said entreatingly.

My friend answered coldly. "They were doing these because they believed that Moslems were violent."

"Right," I exclaimed. "Because they had no idea that the Italian man was framing them for all those crimes. It is not their fault."

My colleague ignored me and continued speaking. "In their forced indoctrination programs, Chinese Communist police forced the Moslem women and men to denounce their faith. Those who refused to do so were severely punished. From these details alone, I could see how a modern-day holocaust was already happening in China. It was shocking to see that all of this terrible oppression started because an Italian officer and his German friend were carrying out bombings and framing it on Moslems. Now, the Chinese media and government thought all Moslem people were violent. But it was incorrect."

After speaking with the man from DHS, I found out that there were innocent Russian prisoners locked up in secret prison cells that were guarded by Chinese soldiers, but after speaking to several Georgia, Belarusian and Muscovite entrepreneurs, I was surprised to hear that the Chinese communist police had been torturing them most severely. Russian tourists were facing hardship in Chinese secret prisons, because the Chinese state-controlled media was systematically publishing hateful propaganda and news against Moslems in television and newspapers and they thought the Russian government was funding those terror attacks in Beijing.

This caused most of the Chinese general population to harbor hatred towards Russians and Moslems. Ultimately, the Chinese Communist government began to openly persecute the Moslem minorities. It began happening in Xinjiang Autonomous Region in western China against the Turkic Moslem minority, in conditions that human rights experts have labeled both physical and cultural genocide. Nearly one million men and women were being forced to pick cotton in those camps. According to human rights groups, new factories have been built within the grounds of the re-education camps and Moslem prisoners are forced to work in horrible and unsafe conditions.

Human rights groups claimed that the Chinese government has stripped away the religious and other freedoms of the Chinese Moslem people, culminating in an oppressive system of mass surveillance, detention, indoctrination, and forced sterilization. I remembered that these were exactly the same way Nazi government in Germany treated the Jewish population in the years leading to the holocaust. Many Chinese Moslems feared that a modern-day holocaust and mass genocide against Moslems was already on the way in China, and the rest of the world's governments have failed to be sufficiently vocal about it. It was truly unfortunate that all of these terrible oppression and crime were taking place because Richard and his Italian friend decided to detonate bombs in China and frame Moslems and Russians for those crimes.

According to first-hand accounts from inside the internment camps, former detainees and several guards have told the international news agencies that they experienced or saw evidence of an organized system of mass rape, sexual abuse and torture.

I wished that the Chinese government showed mercy towards the innocent Moslems who were living in their large country. But there was so much hatred, that I did not know what I could do to help them or save those millions of Chinese Moslems who were being imprisoned and tortured in Chinese jails. It certainly takes a lot of strength not to hate! The strongest and bravest people in the world are

those that don't hate others. I wanted everyone to understand that. I wished the American soldiers who bombed the civilians of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan had mercy. I wish those American pilots spared the innocent women and children in Syria, but they showed to compassion towards civilians."

The Italian born soldier, Admiral Baldassarre Bastico, was the man who was responsible for carrying out the terroristic activities in China and in Europe. Each time he blew up a building in China, he immediately framed Chinese Moslems for it, and then he framed Russian and Ukrainian businessmen for those acts. He made it look as though the Russian and Belarusian ministers and businessmen paid the Turkic Moslems to carry out those bombings. The Chinese government thought they were guilty so they began to capture and torture any Russian tourists that visited China.

Although Baldassarre Bastico called himself American, his family members are all members of the Italian mafia, but I knew how he operated, so I immediately set out to China to rescue some of the Russian businessmen who were being locked inside Chinese secret jails.

During the summer of 2013, while I was assigned to Ramstein Air Base in Germany, a middle-aged man was selected as Noncommissioned Officer of the Year. He had a spectacular reputation and had participated in numerous international military operations in the Middle East.

"There have been dozens of serious attacks on American consulates, and other government and state buildings. The FBI and the NSA found out that this corrupt Italian admiral was responsible for all of it." The Noncommissioned Officer told me.

"I don't understand how he manages to sabotage so many massive infrastructures inside the United States." I wondered aloud.

The Noncommissioned Officer explained. "This Italian-American army officer has lots of loyal employees who work for him. Many of those employees are former special forces or senior intelligence officer of the CIA and the NSA. They receive lots of money in exchange for doing these criminal activities for him."

"What are the things that he makes his employees do?" I asked.

"The Italian naval commander hires independent hackers and code breakers from Iceland, Denmark and Germany, and uses them to corrupt the government computer systems, and erase social security records and tax information of average Americans."

"Why does he destroy government tax records?" I inquired.

"This man wants to become the next president of the United States, so he is very eager to destabilize the current government and is constantly trying to overthrow the Biden Administration. Every week, he uses his agents and mercenaries to bring in bombs to major American cities, and then he goes to the FBI building, and reports the crime, and helps the law enforcement agencies deactivate those bombs. Each time, he places evidence at those bomb sites and frames Muslims or Arabs for those attempted attacks. But in the end, the U.S. government always becomes very happy with him, and he is considered to be a hero and savior."

"Why is he so desperate to destroy the American government?"

"The Italian-American military commander had always been very eager to take over the government of the United States. So, in order to destabilize the country, he wanted to destroy American tech companies first. American companies are regularly attacked by his hackers, and American military GPS system has been corrupted by the Italian man's agents, but despite all his criminal activities, he meets Congressmen and senators every day and tells them that Russians were behind the cyber-attacks and that the White House should slap more sanctions on Russia."

"Does anyone believe that Russia was behind those pathetic cyber-attacks?"

"Well, the Italian man does a thorough frame job, and he frames Russian exactly the same way he framed Muslims and Arabs for his past crimes."

"When several senior FSB officials and FAPSI's Director, found out about the cyber-attacks, they realized that the Italian man was framing Russia for his own crimes. They tried to arrest him, but the Admiral immediately killed those FSB officers."

I asked the officer. "Why did this naval officer kill FAPSI officials?"

"FAPSI is intimately involved in surveillance and counter-surveillance activities, and the senior leaders of this organization was beginning to discover how dangerous this navy commander was."

"That is why he killed them?"

The Noncommissioned Officer answered. "After assassinating those Russian intelligence officers, the Italian naval commander came under suspicion, and other Russian officials began to investigate him. In order to appear innocent, the Italian man framed several Muslim and Arab men for the assassinations. He framed two Emirati sheiks, and a Saudi Arabian prince and told the Russians that those Middle Eastern businessmen had ordered the assassination of the Russian intelligence officers. He also supplied the FSB and FAPSI with lots of fake evidence, and eventually, they believed him, and began to investigate the Arab men.

I sighed. "So, once more, the Italian man and his German friend got away."
"Indeed." He replied and we both left the German military base.

Zhejiang province, Southern China.

Surrounded by steel-plated, windowless walls, the Suzhou District Detention Center was an ominous-looking building situated on the edge of Taizhou, a city in China's southern Zhejiang province.

This detention facility housed ordinary criminals as well as political prisoners who had been denied trial. Due to the relative obscurity of this coastal city, the prison complex did not utilize computerized security protocols. Most of the building were secured with manual latches and hand-made padlocks.

The gates of this secret Chinese jail house were equipped with manually charged electric wires. These four three-story brick buildings with sloped roof were a residence to high-priority prisoners such as the Russian businessmen, and was fenced with a twelve feet brick wall. The exercise yard was divided into two sections by a wall in the middle, on top of which three guards armed with wireless XREP Taser projectile that could be fired from a standard 12-Gauge shotgun, patrolled in shifts to keep an eye on both sides of the field.

There was also a crematorium, a moderate sized building built of brick and stone, located half kilometer away from the main prison buildings. Although this prison was not designed to carry out executions, each month, several prisoners died from excessive torture. Sometimes, the frail and weak inmates would suffer heart attacks after being water boarded and drowned hundreds of times each day in icy water, and sometimes, electrocuting with high voltages would cause innocent prisoners to die. Those who died of unnatural causes were oftentimes cremated within the prison grounds, in order to prevent international Human Rights Watch, demand an autopsy.

However, the presence of the taser-armed guards no longer concerned the helpless Turkic Moslems and the Russian visitors who came into China to conduct economic trades and who were locked in here, as they had lost the privilege of outdoor activity. Not only were these Russian prisoners confined to solitary cell, they were denied access to the most basic technological device, including light bulbs.

I found the cell where the man from Russia was being held, and I managed to break the lock with my knife. The sole source of light that now entered his cell was from the rectangular window situated one-and-half feet above the ground that delivered meals.

Artyom Roschektayev blinked in surprise at the noise.

It was weekend; he was almost positive. The shortage of active staff meant that they prison would provide only two meals for the day. Today's breakfast consisted of a piece of rotten bread, and he felt hunger gnawing in his abdomen but he doubted any additional meal would follow until the next morning.

The Russian businessman rolled over the hard mat. His guards at this notorious Chinese Secret Prison refused to grant him the privilege of sleeping on a bedding. The painful style bed sheet was a punishment, because he had to spend months sleeping on straw-covered beds. Along with a spell of starvation, he had to endure the punishment of sleeping on hard concrete floor after his escape attempt was uncovered.

He glanced up at the windowsill. It was sloped upward, facing the sky but the screen mesh and iron fence beneath the whitened glass obscured the time of the day. Shaded from the word behind a sanded glass, he could only be certain whether it was night or day. Time was meaningless beyond this point.

The window dimmed slightly. It must be past afternoon. He heard a metallic clatter on his cell door.

It was I, entering the cell. I motioned for him to be silent. He fidgeted in his seat when he heard the door swing inward. But I assured him that I was here to rescue him from the terrible Chinese prison.

The Russian man began to tell me what the Chinese Communist Party policemen did to him after he was captured. They began to torture him immediately by drowning him in icy cold water. Artyom Roschektayev said he could barely breathe. Water gushed into his tiny living space. His feet were submerged. The flow did not abate. It kept streaming from all sides until the water reached his ears. Roschektayev said he had to tilt his head to continue breathing but then his nose filled with water. The entire room was completely full of water. For the first minute, it felt like the old-fashioned water boarding, but he had never been forced to remain submerged under water for such a long period. He kept his mouth tightly shut and began a countdown in his head. He never reached two hundred. The room around his was fading. The walls were closing in. Everything went dark.

Sharp pinches on his ankles jolted him into consciousness. He was still suspended from the metal rod above. The water was gone. Just when he felt relieved that the drowning episode was over, the electrocution began.

The Chinese guards constantly tortured him.

Somehow, the gnawing pain in his stomach was in par with the burning sensation of his electrocuted skin. He stared helplessly at the dark streaks of burnt marks that lines his legs. Eleventh day without a morsel of food. He wanted to cry in despair, but tears seemed to have dried out permanently. He was so tired. The Chinese soldiers regularly kept enemy combatant captives awake was for hundred-eighty hours at a time. Before being arrested, Artyom Roschektayev did not imagine that sleep deprivation could be so painful and depressing. He thought not being able to sleep was a mere nuisance and did not constitute to torture. In this secret ghost prison, Roschektayev now seriously considered changing his mind about it.

The Chinese secret prison site was a terrible place, and the Communist police kept asking Roschektayev if he came to Beijing to do terrorism. The method of torture was getting more grotesque by the day. Electrocution was the norm of each condemned day in captivity. Khaled told me that one morning, the voltage attached to his iron manacles started to increase. The burning sensation spread to his chest; his blood boiled and suffocated his lungs. The heat from this electrocution was turning his eyeballs into scorching orbs of agony. Artyom Roschektayev told me how he prayed for death because even death could not be so painful.

Roschektayev kept asking me that how was it possible. How could a human being treat another in such manner?

I looked sadly at the man. Artyom Roschektayev was an honorable, middle-aged man, who had light beard and a very kind face.

I asked him how he ended up in this Chinese prison, and he told me that he came to China to conduct business as he owned several technical companies in Moscow, and his family members and uncles own several of the largest hotels in St. Petersburg.

The prisoner also told me that one of his friends who was from the city of Tolyatti, was also arrested a few weeks earlier in Moscow. I asked him if his friend was captured by Moscow police, but Khaled said it was the Chinese secret spy police who took his friend and held him in a secret black site prison in Moscow. I was very shocked to hear that, because I only thought the Americans operated secret prison systems overseas, and I did not know that China also created and built secret torture centers in countries like the Russian Federation. Another young Russian man told me that he was held for six weeks at a Chinese-run secret detention facility in Moscow along with at least two other Russian men. I quickly wrote down everything they told me, because I wanted to report the first evidence that China was operating a “black site” beyond its borders.

The Chinese police seemed to have been living in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and searched for anyone they found suspicious and they secretly abduct Russian men from their homes or from their hotel Finland, Belarus, and Dubai, and detain them at a prison which is controlled by Chinese officials. While black sites were common inside China, it was alarming that they had so much power in other countries as well.

Hours after Artyom Roschektayev arrived in Beijing, and booked in to the most expensive hotel there, he was picked up from his hotel’s terrace, and then he found himself passing into oblivion. When he awoke, he was inside a small cell, shackled and naked. A mechanical voice echoed from an overhead voice box. In foreign-sounding English, the voice ordered him to remain standing completely still in the center of the cell and the temperature was swiftly dropping. Artyom Roschektayev involuntarily shuddered and he was spontaneously punished for disobeying the order. Several metal rods were lowered from the ceiling and he was struck repeatedly by the robotic arms. Roschektayev never realized corporal punishment was so painful. He shrieked in pain. His screams were so loud that his own ears hurt. After the beating episode was over, Roschektayev tried to whisper to himself but couldn’t make out his own words.

His heart sank when he realized the excessive screaming made his vocal cords permanently damaged.

On the second day, Artyom Roschektayev was shown a projected image. It was an elderly woman. His seventy-year-old mother! She was being held in a dimly-lit bare cell and looked frightened. The Chinese communist soldiers told him that they would torture and rape his mother if he didn’t obey every tiny command. Artyom Roschektayev later told me that it was at this moment that he wanted to die quickly in order to ensure his mother didn’t suffer or become a casualty. But he was not in the possession of any weapons or sharp objects. Taking his own life would be harder than he thought. Roschektayev first attempted suicide by ramming his head into the wall behind him. He continued this until he lost consciousness but his captors immediately injected him with tranquilizers and threatened to electrocute his mother if he tried something like that again.

The next day, the Chinese men tortured Artyom Roschektayev again. He wailed openly. The thermostat on the wall read hundred- and ten-degrees Fahrenheit. The fetid stench of his own feces was making it impossible to breathe. He no longer cared if his Chinese captor saw his weakness. Surviving this was not the priority anymore. Somehow, his guts told him this was over. The Chinese police who kidnapped him had no intention of ever releasing him or his mother. They were toying with the captive, feeding him oxygen so he would live to suffer another day. It was the handiwork of a professional sadist. Each day was meant to be far worse than the day before. On the third day of his captivity, Artyom was forced to do knee bends until he fainted.

Artyom Roschektayev peered at the self-inflicted cut on the inside of his right wrist. Seven scars. This was his seventieth day as a prisoner. Seventy days in a cell, without food or clothes. Blinding lights prevented Artyom Roschektayev from sleeping and for days on end, the Chinese captors kept the temperature above ninety degrees Fahrenheit to incite paralyzing thirst in the Russian and Moslem prisoners. When they nearly died from thirst, the guards forced them to drink water from the dirty wastebasket and the toilets.

His mind floated back to the day he was taken. The hotel room in Beijing was registered under a pseudonym. There was not a soul in the city in northern China who knew his true identity. No one knew he was a senior member of the Russian ruling family and that his uncle was the minister of tourism. Artyom Roschektayev didn't care what happened to him. He only hoped that his mother would be unharmed. He would give his captors no reason or excuse to harm her. He would do everything and anything the psychopath Chinese soldiers and guards demanded.

But it still worried him that he was completely oblivious as to the cause of his torment. Why was the Chinese tormentor torturing him? The man in the speaker asked no question. It wasn't even a phishing expedition. The captor sought no information nor gave any explanation. They accused the Russian man of funding terrorist attacks on Beijing subway lines, but it was a false accusation.

His tortures continued. The cell was beginning to cool down. If this was like the last time, then the temperature will drop to near freezing level. The constant cycle of being in suffocating heat and to have the same space become excruciatingly cold was mind-wrecking.

Dozing off would result in him being doused with ice water.

Artyom Roschektayev could not fathom how his captor was so creative in his cruelty. Nothing could prepare him for this kind of terrible torture. Artyom had heard much about the harrowing tales from prisoners in the American naval base in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and in other black sites, as well as the psychological tortures carried out by the communist regimes. But nothing he had heard felt close to the terror he was experiencing in the Chinese prison.

After rescuing Artyom Roschektayev, I took him back to the Russian Federation, and his family members were happy to reunite with him. They treated him in expensive hospitals and private clinics and finally, the Russian man was able to find peace. I was pleased that I could help him, and save one man's life, but I knew there were hundreds of other Russian men and women who were being locked up in Chinese secret black jail. They were being tortured because the Italian-American naval officer was framing them for crimes he had carried out himself.

But I knew I had a lot of work to do, if I wanted to prove the innocence of all the Russian businessmen and tourists who were in China, and I wanted to help them all.

When Dustin called me early on a Sunday morning, I knew something was wrong. The hacker sounded terrified. "Hey, there is something you need to know."

"What is it, Dustin?" I asked. "You sound nervous."

"I am more than nervous," the Russian hacker admitted. "Something happened."

"I am listening."

"I just received an alert from my recording box I inserted into NORAD's main satellite. It seems that the American sky-watching Ballistic Missile Early Warning System is on high alert, and the PAW radars that monitor the seas are also picking up hostile signals from a Russian nuclear-armed submarine."

"How do you know all this?" I questioned.

Dustin cleared his throat. "I intercepted the data that was being relayed directly to NORAD's command post inside Cheyenne Mountain. The report mentioned that they suspected that a gigantic Russian nuclear-armed submarine is preparing to launch an underwater missile towards the United States."

"This is insane. It will cause a nuclear war."

My friend took a breath before speaking. "I know, *but* this is a false alarm."

"What do you mean, Dustin?" I asked, very confused now.

"I tried to verify the story, so I contacted my friend who works in the Sevastopol Naval Base and is currently part of the Black Sea Fleet. He told me this is a hoax. Russian Navy did not aim any weapon towards America. It must have been a staged operation."

"How could NORAD be mistaken?"

The brilliant code-breaker spoke slowly. "NORAD has been supplied with false information. I double checked their source. They received a call from a former employee of League 13, that served under that NSA Black Ops director."

"Oh, no," I involuntarily groaned. "Not Richard again."

“I am afraid it looks like that, but Richard is running the show by proxy, so he is making his former employees do this for him.”

“I thought Richard was under investigation from the Senate Intelligence Committee.” I reminded Dustin.

“He was, but after he single-handedly brought in the alert, and tipped off the Defense Department about an impending Russian nuclear strike, he got back his credibility and the Department of Justice decided to suspend their investigation on him.”

“How is Richard still doing this?”

“He was reinstated as the head of the NSA after he brought in this tip,” Dustin informed me. “White House was pleased with his progress and he was duly promoted, and was given operational control over the missile launches.”

“But only the American president has the authority to order a nuclear launch, right?”

“That is true, and the POTUS gave the *USS Seawolf* full permission to launch the nukes at Russia,” Dustin said sadly. “He believed in Richard, and thought the United States was under attack.”

“The U.S. government is not stupid,” I insisted. “They wouldn’t just randomly order a nuclear strike on a powerful country like Russia.”

“They were manipulated,” Dustin stated flatly. “The White House believed that the Russians are prepared to launch sea-based ballistic missiles, and the President gave the order to retaliate to counterbalance the Russian forces.”

I thought about the consequence of the disaster that was about to take place, so I asked, “What kind of retaliation did the president order?”

“He gave green light to *USS Seawolf*, a nuclear-powered attack submarine that is armed with nearly thirty nuclear guided Trident missiles. Do you know what will happen if even one of those American torpedoes hit the Motherland? Together, the bombs contain fifteen megatons of explosives, and that is equivalent so much more than the total destruction carried out by all sides in the Second World War. The deadly force will annihilate everything.”

“How deadly are we talking about, Dustin?”

“In the entirety of World War Two, only five megatons of explosives were used by all fighting parties that were involved, and one of these nuclear-tipped American Trident missiles in *USS Seawolf* has enough devastating firepower that could effectively wipe out the largest Russian cities within seconds.”

“Where is the *USS Seawolf* now?”

“The *Seawolf* was deployed to the Arctic region last month, so it is the closest vessel to the Russian border. That is why the President tasked this submarine with this retaliation job.”

“Okay, Dustin, when was this order given?”

“Just now,” the hacker informed me, “which means American naval commander inside the *Seawolf* are going to launch the nuke any hour.”

“There must be a way to contact them – to tell the submarine commander to wait a few minutes and delay the launch. I have to find a way to stop the missile from going off.”

“What are you thinking?” Dustin asked.

“The only way to stop this disaster is to contact the American submarine and persuade the captain to cancel the launch.”

“He won’t listen to you, in disobedience to the President of the United States.”

“He will if we can prove that Russia was framed, and that the Russian submarine never locked aim at the United States or any other country. It was a bluff, in which Richard used a group of hackers to mess up the radar system and make it look as though Russia was launching a nuclear-tipped sea-based guided missiles, at the United States.”

“But the American military chiefs and the White House, all agreed with Richard and declared they should attack Russia before they had a chance to strike, and the sitting president gave a green light for the nuclear strike, an attack that would devastate a city as large as Moscow in seconds. I don’t see how we can stop this.

Dammit! I can’t just stand here and let the world get destroyed. If the American submarine launches the nuclear missile, millions of Russian civilians would die. And the worst result of this catastrophe would be that Russia would have no choice but to retaliate and strike back with nuclear warheads. And many densely populated American cities would also be destroyed. Millions of Russian and American citizens would die in a senseless and dangerous war.”

Dustin remained quiet for a long time, and then he spoke. “I am praying that we can prevent it in time.”

“Find me a way to talk to the submarine’s commanding officer.” I told him.

“Right.” Dustin paused, and I could hear him typing on his keyboard fiercely. “Captain Allan Gilmore. He is in charge of the *USS Seawolf* and has been tasked to launch the nuclear missiles.”

“Get me on a phone line with him. And try to find out the exact location of *USS Seawolf*.”

"It will be a little hard to track the vessel, because nuclear submarines do not use active sonars since it could betray their position to the enemy. The *Seawolf* is a massive vessel. It is a classic 19000 tons of nuclear-powered navy submarine that has a fully operational nuclear reactor in there."

"I am not interested in the boat, Dustin. Just tell me how do they navigate?"

"They use an inertial navigation system. These are basically a GPS system that uses accelerometers and gyroscopes to record the last known GPS location and use it as a guiding point."

"You must know some sort of submarine tracking technology."

"I am trying, but I am really sorry to say that I am not being able to find a secure line to contact Captain Gilmore." Dustin said, apologetically.

"I don't understand. There must be some way to communicate with the American sailors."

I inquired. "How do their families contact them?"

"Via email. Each sailor in the submarine is given a unique email address that the families can then use to write to them, but it is heavily censored."

"Then let's use secure radio channels." I suggested.

"I am afraid once the submarine is submerged in salt water, most radio waves do not pass through the ocean water."

"Then how do they communicate?" I wanted to know.

"Most U.S. submarines communicate using very low frequency waves, like the VLF transmitters."

"VLF signals can penetrate salty ocean?"

"Yes, but it is also on a low bandwidth, which means it's really slow. So, we can pass messages, but not in real time audio or video."

"But will the sailors receive our message?"

"They will," Dustin confirmed. "But they won't be able to respond to VLF frequency. To reply to our message, they will have to rise several hundred feet and upload their response, or acknowledgement."

It took Dustin nearly one hour to establish a secure link to the submarine's main deck. I used the military clearance code and requested to speak to the commander of *USS Seawolf*.

Allan Gilmore answered the call and after hearing that I had some important update about the nuclear launch, he told me stay on the line while he solved another emergency crisis.

The captain put me on hold and I could hear restless conversations taking place in the background.

It sounded as though Captain Gilmore was making an announcement in the submarine's central miking system.

"Alert one. Incoming emergency action message." A robotic voice echoed.

Another anxious voice spoke. "Captain, we have a properly formatted emergency action message from the National Command Authority for a strategic missile launch, sir."

Captain Gilmore answered brusquely. "Get the authenticator and have the skipper check the battle stations torpedo and man the station's missile for strategic launch."

"Sir, request permission to authenticate."

"Permission granted. Authenticate." It was Captain Gilmore's voice.

From my end of the line, I heard several marine cryptographers reading the sequence of eighteen letters and numbers to verify the president's order to launch the nuclear missile. "Alpha, Echo, Tango, Beta, Echo, Niner, Charlie..."

After two minutes, the Captain confirmed that the message was authentic, and he concurred with the launch order by activating his missile key.

"Set condition one status quo for strategic missile launch." Captain Gilmore declared in a grim voice. "The release and launch of nuclear weapons have been authorized. Enter the launch keys."

"But sir," another voice spoke shrilly. "Captain, we are out of VLF radio range. Our optimal messaging capacity is cutting off."

Allan Gilmore answered calmly. "Then extend the low frequency antenna and attempt to resume connection with Pentagon."

A minute later, his voice sounded louder, and he addressed me again. "I don't know who you think you are, but according to reliable intel I received, the Russian Navy have threatened a launch nuclear missile against our country and are fueling their submarines right now. Pentagon sent word that they will have launch capability in 60 minutes. I was given orders to launch our missiles, which is exactly what I am going to do."

“Captain, you need to listen me. This is a life and death matter. If you launch those missiles at the Russian Federation, then they will retaliate. It’ll start a full-blown nuclear war!” I pleaded with the submarine commander, hoping he would see some sense in what I was saying.

But Captain Gilmore replied resolutely. “I have orders directly from the president of the United States, and as a military man, I am bound by oath to obey the orders of my Commander-in-Chief.”

“Captain, I know you are a good man, and you are serving in the Army because you want to defend your country. Think about what will happen to America if you do this.”

“I am defending my country. I am trying to protect American from a Russian strike.”

“I told you before, this was a hoax. Someone sabotaged the NORAD’s radar system and raised a false alarm to convince the White House to order a nuclear strike on Russia. But the truth is they never planned to attack us. And if you hit them first, Russia will have no choice but to hit back. Captain, ask yourself if you live with that. Can you sit back in your submarine and allow millions of Americans to burn to death?”

“What do you expect me to do? Disobey a direct order?” Gilmore sounded worried.

“I am merely asking you to wait a little while, until we can accurately verify the situation. So far, the Russian defense agencies denied all accusations and said they did not aim any weapons at the United States. If that is true, White House will definitely send you the abort code.”

“It is a huge risk that you are asking me to take.”

“Captain, I am not asking you to do anything wrong. Just listen to your own conscience, and use common sense here, sir.”

The American submarine commander spoke slowly. “Your transmission is coming through a very low frequency receiver. We are reading you clearly.”

“Sir, all I am asking is you verify the order, and double check with the White House.”

“Negative,” Captain Gilmore said harshly. “We are too deep beneath the ocean to receive any radio communication. There is limited radio transmission here.”

I immediately replied. “Then you need to rise to shallow waters to reestablish communications. Someone is using you to begin a third world war.”

“It is too late for that, young man. I have already authorized the launch.”

“Captain, I beg you, do not launch a missile. It would be the most grievous error made in this century. The Russians did not plan to attack the United States. Please, trust me this one time.”

I was still speaking to the American submarine commander when the transmission broke off. I did not know whether he intentionally severed the communication line, or if the submarine was too deep under water to read my transmission signals. In any case, I became more and more agitated. Dustin wanted to help me, but there was not much either of us had the capability of doing. I could not call the White House and tell them to cancel the nuclear missile launch. I knew they would never listen to either me or my friend.

I remembered an old mentor who had spoken to me previously, about the suspicious activities of Cynthia’s stepfather. Richard was a junior member at the State Department, and the man had warned me to be careful.

Rear Admiral Kent Hogan was an unusual man. He was brilliant, but also intuitive. I first met him when Richard recruited me to work for the NSA’s Black Ops unit.

Kent Hogan was the head of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, and was formerly the Director of Pentagon Force Protection Agency.

I dialed Hogan’s number from memory and waited.

His call went to answering machine, but I quickly left a message, explaining the urgent situation I was in. I told the Admiral how it was imperative he do everything in his power to prevent the United States Navy from launching nuclear missiles at the Russian Federation.

As I was leaving the emotional voicemail, the line clicked and Kent Hogan answered. “What a surprise to hear from me.”

I breathed in relief. I knew this man would be able to help and guide me. “Please, Admiral. I need to know what is happening?”

The Rear Admiral sighed. “Pentagon officials just announced that all U.S. Military forces have been directed to set DEFCON two.”

“What?” I almost shouted. “The last time America entered a state of emergency was during the Cuban Missile Crisis.”

“Washington thinks this one is even more deadly, so they gave authority to the *USS Seawolf* to initiate a potential preemptive strike.” Kent Hogan stated.

“But, sir, you know this isn’t right. Russia is being framed. They didn’t aim any missiles at America. Someone gave Pentagon a false reading.”

“I suspected that,” Rear Admiral Hogan said calmly. “And the only way we can prevent a disaster is if some powerful leader in Kremlin contacts Washington directly and clarify this issue.”

“How do we get word to this powerful Russian leader?” I asked, bewildered.

“Uh, not *we*,” Hogan clarified. “*You* are a Russian citizen, so you will be making contact with someone I trust. I can’t just call the Russian embassy. You know, in my position, it will look very treasonous to the Pentagon, and I could lose my job over it. But you should phone him right away. The man you need to talk to is now sheltering in place at the American Embassy in Moscow.”

“Did the U.S. Consulate come under any threat as well?” I asked, wondering why embassy officials were sheltering in place.

“Not officially,” Rear Admiral Hogan said, “but embassy staffs reported heightened security since the missile crisis. But they are not too worried. The U.S. embassy in Moscow was built to be entirely self-sufficient. It is practically a fortress that has its own electric generator, its own water filtration plant, its own sewage, a private fire station, and even its own internet uplink to circumvent the Russian network.”

“They are really scared?” I commented sadly.

“Of course, they are. We all are worried sick,” the American Admiral replied. “The U.S. Navy believes that Russian are prepared to launch sea-based ballistic missiles aimed at the Eastern Seaboard.”

“That is absurd,” I exclaimed. “I checked with trusted sources in Moscow, and they said they don’t even have any nuclear submarine anywhere near the United States.”

“Well, I can’t say how reliable those sources are, but the DIA and NSA are both on high alert. They claim they received an anonymous tip with the radar reading that showed Russian ships mobilizing their nukes. Now, we think there might be a deadly confrontation soon.”

“How much area are we talking about? In terms of impact.”

Rear Admiral Kent Hogan paused before answering my question. “Well, they are being smart, so they are not launching an overhead missile, because they know NORAD’s anti-missile protection will block any incoming projectiles, but if the Russians succeed in launching the nuclear missile from a submarine, it *will* cause great devastation.”

“It will only detonate underwater, right?” I asked, a little anxiously. “There shouldn’t be civilian casualties.”

“It is not how nukes work. If the nuke hits at our eastern coast, New York, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and even Massachusetts will immediately experience massive tsunami that will be triggered by the underwater explosion.”

“How many lives will be directly impacted? By the tsunami or tremor?”

“It is hard to say, but at least twenty million people live around those areas. And we didn’t even factor in how deadly and contaminated that radioactive water would be and how far-reaching consequence it will have for another hundred years.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Rear Admiral Kent Hogan continued to give me detailed information about his contacts, and he told me to call them at once and try to diffuse the nuclear crisis.

I recalled a conversation I had a week earlier with an intelligence analyst, who was asking me to help him shut down an illegal arms trade in the Baltic region.

I was curious about the mysterious international weapons traders, so I asked him what kind of group they were.

“Arms dealers,” Chuck had told me. “They were trading long-range missiles, unmanned boats, and anti-ship weapons in exchange for whitened money. They recently purchased an underground storage facility adjacent to The Icebox.”

I was confused. “What is the Icebox?”

“It is a codename for a Russian nuclear missile base near Lake Pyasino. The site is believed to be storing at least fifty MIRV-equipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. If the wrong people get access to that base, then they would be in the possession of several dozen deadly weapons.”

Chuck was a senior national security official in the George H. Bush administration, and he currently worked at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in West Virginia. He displayed several photographs before me.

I refocused my attention on the minuscule images of the landscape. “What am I looking at?”

“These are satellite images showing renewed activity at a Soviet nuclear facility.” Chuck informed me. “Inside sources tell me that the Communist regime is preparing to start or has already started reprocessing plutonium for nuclear weapons.”

“How did you come across this image?” I wanted to know.

“It was a commercial satellite that exposed this. The photo showed smoke rising from a small building at a Radiochemistry Laboratory in the Urals and heavy vehicle movement from an adjacent thermal plant. The lab in question is known to reprocess spent fuel rods to extract plutonium for nuclear bombs.”

“Do you have any previous satellite imagery of that region?”

“I do, in fact. Previous satellites images showed signs of suspicious activity at the thermal power plant in recent weeks.”

“But the CIA already knows that,” I reminded Chuck. “Who asked you to conduct this investigation?”

“Oh, you remember the nice old man from NSA’s zero division.”

“You are talking about the Black Ops group?” I inquired.

Chuck nodded. “Yes, I call him Richard. Well, he asked me to look for some incriminating evidence against the Kremlin so we can use it for leverage. I did some digging, and all I am saying is that the latest activity suggests that the USSR, or whatever is left of it, has launched a new effort for nuclear reprocessing.”

“If you are running an errand for Richard, then I don’t think you need my help, Chuck. Good luck.”

The meeting between Chuck and myself lasted less than ten minutes, but I realized that it was most probably another trick Richard was pulling on the Eurasian continent.

My mind jolted back to present day reality when I received an alert on my computer. Dustin had just forwarded a radio transmission to me, which came directly from Captain Gilmore. It appeared that the commander of the *USS Seawolf* had aborted the missile launch sequence, and decided to listen to me after all. I was elated to hear the news, but my happiness was short lived. Moments later, a second message was intercepted by Dustin’s satellite that showed a new chain of command in the American nuclear-armed submarine.

After investigating further, I discovered that the captain of the submarine was placed under arrest and his second-in-command assumed the position of captain in the Navy vessel. I immediately contacted the new commander, who was an inexperienced young sailor, and I begged him to halt the missile launch, but this young naval commander was staunchly disagreeing with me. The new commander told me the EAM message was crystal clear. The Emergency Action Message was a unique code used by the U.S. military to relay orders to missile-firing nuclear submarines via special transmitters designed for communication with stealth submarines

He also said he received a direct order from the NSA’s Black Ops chief and the Pentagon instructing him to arrest Captain Gilmore for disobeying a direct command of the President. I told the young man how he should not under any circumstances agree to launch the missiles, but he refused and ended the radio transmission abruptly.

Yevgeny was a prosecutor at the Babushkinsky district court in Moscow. I called him on a direct line to his office phone, and told him about the danger his city was facing. He was terrified to hear that American submarines were preparing to launch nuclear missiles at Russia, and he promised to contact senior State Duma members to arrange an emergency meeting with their American counterparts. Yevgeny also told me he suspected a certain hacker for creating the false radar reading that showed NORAD that Russia was planning to attack North America.

“Who is this hacker?” I asked Yevgeny.

“I only know his surname. Dr. Lenz, I think.”

“Very well. I will keep you apprised as soon as I find out more about Lenz.”

As soon as I ended the call with Yevgeny, I called my friend Dustin, and told him to find everything he could find on Lenz. Five minutes later, the brilliant code-breaker spelled out the home address and phone number of Lenz.

“One more question, Dustin. What is so special about this Lenz?”

“This kid was a genius. A MIT graduate. Top of his class. Won the international hacker award for three years in a row. He disappeared in Portugal, after meeting with this man. Recognize him?”

I studied the black-white photo of a bald man. “I know him. He is one of Richard’s most trusted associates. What would they want with a hacker like Lenz?”

“They could have been after his computer specializations,” Dustin suggested. “He was an expert in monitoring submarine radars. And we believe he also knew how to manipulate the maritime readings.”

“Does that mean Lenz would have the capability of faking a radar alert, making it appear as though Russia was trying to nuke America?”

Dustin weighed his words carefully before replying. “The satellite images I was able to access over Portugal suggests that the hacker was abducted, and he is currently being forced to do these for his kidnappers.”

I also learned from Dustin that Lenz was an MIT honors graduate, with a degree in Non-linear crypto-algorithms and stochastic system analysis. I had learned that DARPA hired Lenz as soon as he graduated from MIT University, then he moved out of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency in Arlington, Virginia, in order to build a lab of his own. He was later found to be carrying out illegal hacking experiments, and the Federal Bureau of Regulations cancelled his license and banned him from accessing electronics.

I had planned to contact the FBI and report a missing person report in order to locate the hacker, but before I had time to do that, a greater crisis loomed ahead.

When the new commander of the USS Seawolf decided to move ahead with the nuclear launch sequence, he initiated the lockdown protocol, and this signal reached the Russian Naval patrol instantaneously. NORAD's Satellites captured radio transmissions from the Russian Navy, that gave the American submarine three severe warnings, and asked them to halt the missile launch at once. Otherwise, Russia would have to retaliate with their own missiles.

When I read the message, I knew that the Russian military had finally realized that their nation was about to be annihilated by American nuclear warheads and they were only trying to defend their motherland, but I also knew there would be no winners in a nuclear war.

I immediately contacted my friend who was an active member of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and told him to pause any potential missile strike. I spoke tearfully in my native language, to the commander of the Russian Fleet and begged him to listen to me. I told him not to give the order to launch nuclear missiles at the United States, because then the White House would have its proof that Russia is an instigator.

The commander told me he would have to retaliate to American aggression, but I pleaded with him to wait, and make sure the attack was real. I asked him not to launch a weapon even if he saw the *USS Seawolf* launching a live missile at them, because the whole farce was created by someone who wanted desperately to begin a war between America and Russia, destroying both great nations on the process.

I thought no one would listen to me, but finally, one junior radio transmitter who had been listening to me speaking, finally addressed me directly and told me he believed I was saying the truth, and he agreed to tell his superiors that the American missile launch was a false alarm. Within minutes, the Russian Navy switched off their target lock switch and canceled the nuclear missile launch.

Meanwhile, Pentagon officials finally noticed that the Russian military disarmed and disengaged all their nuclear weapons and were not trying to attack America. The Russian defense minister also contacted the White House directly and explained how there had been a serious misunderstanding, and that they were never intending to start a war. The minister also notified the Pentagon that a rogue element within the NSA was trying to cook up a false war.

And the American Secretary of Defense then contacted the American submarine and told the commanders of USS Seawolf that the launch had been permanently cancelled. Since there had been several official complaints against Richard, the Senate Intelligence Committee held a month-long hearing about his misdemeanors, and although I never found out what the final verdict of the Committee was, I did learn that Richard spoke fiercely in his own defense, and pleaded that he framed Russia only because he was trying to do what he thought was best for the country.

October, 1990

Few months later, I was returning to the apartment Cynthia I shared when I heard a desperate cry coming from an empty warehouse. It sounded as if woman was being beaten. I froze and my instincts kicked in.

Ever since my mother died, I created a shell around myself that I hoped would protect me from harm. My mother defended me with her life and ultimately embraced death so I could go on living. But I didn't want to live. I never thought there would be any comfort or meaning in being alive without the protection and love of my mother. But despite my desperate ache to be in her company, I tried to survive by giving back. The scenes of my stepfather beating and assaulting my mother every evening haunted me all the time. I knew there were other helpless women in this world, loving and beautiful women like my mother who needed help, who needed someone to save them, so they didn't have to end up getting shot and killed like my dear mother had. I became sensitive to seeing women suffer. Even a random skirmish on the street or a bar where a woman looked as though she was being manhandled would shoot up my adrenaline and drive me into action. I couldn't bear to hear another woman cry in pain- as a ten-year-old child, I couldn't save my mother. Now, I was determined to save this woman who was screaming.

I ran into the downtrodden building to find out who was in trouble but there was no one in the huge landing space. Then as I neared the source of the scream, I saw a large mic box. It was a pre-recorded sound. There was no one in danger. But I had been duped into believing someone needed my help. My gut feeling told me it is a trap so I turned to leave. Just then, I felt a sting on my neck. It was a thick needle. I removed the sharp metal when another hit my thigh. Moments later, everything went dark.

I am certain of one thing; no pain in the world can be more dreadful than that of electric shocks into your body. It is as though your eyes are on fire. Your muscles burn and tear under your skin. I know this because I have felt it firsthand. Even the slightest lack of cooperation would make my captors unleash a barrage of high voltage into my body. A thousand different methods of torture were experimented on me; for how long, I am not sure, but I knew it was untenable. When I regained consciousness, I was no longer in the warehouse. I was in a lab, with no windows, strapped to a metal gurney, hypodermic needles sticking to my neck and arms. I couldn't move my body; it seemed paralyzed. There were people in surgical masks moving into my field of vision but I couldn't see them clearly. They were wearing lab glasses. I was made to wear a heavy-set headphone and strange eerie music was being played into my ears. Unintelligible sound encompassed my brains until I could not hear anything. I tried to move but it was futile. The plastic straps that held me to the gurney was so tight that it cut into my skin.

My thoughts flew back to the time I was first introduced to such terrors. It was right after my sixteenth birthday. I had run away from the Siberian orphanage in which I had languished for five years.

When I was imprisoned and sentenced to death, fear had overpowered my senses as I languished in the dark chambers of a Siberian prison. However, my rescue came in the form of ghostly subversion. I was taken to the spy Camp and granted a second chance at life. There, I lost my identity and nearly forgot my humanity. I was given a new name, new tools. To the world, I was dead.

The routine for recruits were bizarrely conventional. For hours, we had to train to become fighters and saboteurs. Discipline was harsh. The slightest noncompliance would be met with severe repercussions. Sometimes I would become overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and abandonment. My days were mired by uncertainty. New recruits who performed poorly would be canceled. I wallowed in this sorry path, never knowing if I would be next.

Physical exercises would be managed by the chief instructor, Mikhail. He was a brilliant tactician but worked the recruits tirelessly. I was averse to obeying orders. Indeed, listening to the curses and barking orders of the instructors reminded me of my servitude in my own father's home where my mother and I took turns in being belittled and beaten by his fierce rage. I was not remotely inclined to return to a life of bondage and thus rebelled at every opportunity. I did not show up on time at the daily training or briefing. It was at one of these physical training that I was reprimanded severely and sentenced to ten days in isolation. The recruits were ordered to get into pairs and practice fist fight and hand combat.

I was easily able to overpower the recruit who was paired with me, so one of the instructors decided to test my limits and began to land blows after blows at my direction. I deflected a few punches before becoming distraught. I frantically struck back, as though fighting for my life. In my mind, the ghostly images of my father beating me with his belt was whirling like a tornado. I felt the instructor's fist on my arms but I only saw the ruddy face of my angry father who in his drunken rage, was pummeling my mother's face with his clenched fist. In frenzy, I howled and cowered in the middle of the padded floor.

My trainer wanted me to get on my feet so he slapped my face to get me up but that was when I snapped. Like coiled spring, my rage exploded and I grabbed the man's face and leaped on him, hitting him with all my strength. He tried to trap me in a headlock but I twisted my body and bit his ears so hard that it came off. He screamed in agony and recoiled from me. Unfortunately, my outburst did not go unnoticed. From behind the opaque glass window of his office, the Colonel saw what I did and wanted to send me to the sublevel room to be canceled. He felt that I was too wild to be trained into a spy, but Mikhail intervened earnestly and lessened the sentence. I would not die but would have to spend a few days in an isolation cell.

My behavior continued to be far from perfect. Inside the colonel's Camp, I felt like a cornered animal. I could hardly remain calm, even though Mikhail tried to control my erratic behavior. More than once, I saw him giving the colonel various excuses on why I wrecked certain equipment. I did not know the reason for his unmerited kindness but I remember telling him about my time in the orphanage. A silent man, his deep eyes seemed to understand my pain and heartache.

Prior to coming to the training Camp, I was genuinely ignorant in terms of technology and weapons management. I had never even seen a computer in my life. The first time I was allowed to enter a computer lab was exhilarating. I was taken aback by the round object that guided an arrow in the screen.

The computer instructor, a thin boy with dark narrow eyes who looked younger than me, informed us that the item was called a mouse. It was astonishing! I was impressed by the computer; it took me weeks to learn how to right-click the main button and identify

the keys. Once I became skilled in computers, I decided to gift the computer technocrat. I collected several mice from the Camp's kitchen area and placed them in a closed box. I gifted it to the hacker. When he opened the gift box, he shrieked in fright. I was laughing because it seemed so hilarious at that time, but somehow no one else agreed with my sense of humor. I thought I was paying tribute to the computer mouse but he was not amused.

Occasionally, I paid dearly for my obstinacy. I was forced to clean all the weapons in the munitions depot and do hundreds of extra pushups. The Colonel repeatedly threatened to execute me if I did not perform better on the shooting practices. My instructors, who thought I was a wild savage, gave me extra chores every day in order to instill order in me. Before evening fell, I would be so exhausted that I could only stagger to the sleeping quarters and drop into my bed with full equipment and uniform. For nearly two years, my life went on in this meaningless cycle, until Mikhail felt that he could no longer protect me. The Colonel thought I had outlived my usefulness and he wanted me canceled.

Mikhail hurriedly sent me on a minor mission to Paris where away from the Colonel's prying eyes, I was able to survive for a few months without killing people. From there, I was transferred to London and stayed for several weeks. I gathered intel from various former Camp agents who lived in the UK. Eventually, the Colonel agreed that I would be suitable for an undercover mission in America. With my pale blond hair and flat blue eyes, they thought I looked very American. My native English language skill was an added bonus. No one would suspect that I was a Russian boy.

Upon arriving in America, I breathed the fresh air of freedom. I was sure the Colonel couldn't hurt or coerce me anymore. I was safe.

But not anymore. My mind drifts to the present as I am being wheeled into another brightly lit space. It looked like an operating room.

My initial fear was that these men wanted to blind or maim me, or damage my senses, but I later discovered that they had a more sinister plan. I was wheeled into a room with glaring overhead lamps and an attendant injected anesthesia to knock me out. I was surrounded by unusual medical equipment. One of the masked men brandished an I.V. needle and emptied the contents into my body. I awoke with a numb feeling in the lower part of my body. It was cold. With shock, I realized I was naked, but there were no restraints holding me to the metal stretcher. I couldn't move or feel my legs at all.

I peered down and saw a bloodied gauze around my torso. Using my right arm, I pushed the bandage off and saw that parts of my organs were missing. In the haze that was clouding my eyes, I wasn't certain what had transpired, but my testicles were gone, as though someone had surgically removed them. I cried out in horror but my neck muscle was still paralyzed. I didn't know what these men wanted with me but I knew I had to escape this frightful place before they cut off any more of my body parts. The dream of escaping was short lived, however. Around half dozen men swarmed into the room and carried me to a sound proof room where my first session of brainwashing began.

For several months, I was injected with high doses of adrenaline shots in my right arm while anesthetic drugs would be pumped into my left. It was done to destroy my mind's defense and make me incapable of fighting against the technique they were applying to me. For hours, I was subjected to various levels of electric voltage, most of which were applied directly to the center of my skull. Masked surgeons constantly made incisions on my torso and told me I was not a male. They said I was a woman who needed help to repair my reproductive organs. I was confused. Days passed and my confusion only emphasized. I genuinely forgot what my name was. Coherent speech was no longer something I was capable of. I didn't know what was happening to me, but I knew they were destroying my identity, breaking my resolve, piece by piece.

Dreams are something you can't control. It is wonderful because that means another person won't be able to control it either. I discovered this when I was being constantly brainwashed in the lab. I used to dream of my childhood, of the time when my mother was still alive, and in the worst nightmares, I would witness the day she died. It was so long ago, but the dreams were vivid. Women with dark cloaks were marching behind a funeral pyre; they were weeping. It was a burial. My mother's burial. The sweet and kind and beautiful woman who had always defended me against bullies. I could remember her death. I couldn't remember much else from my past but the last time I saw her alive was etched into my subconscious. I would wake from these nightmares, wrecked with feverish tears. Then the masked men would return and begin another tirade of insult and abuse, nearly convincing me that I was women who needed to copulate with a man in order to live a meaningful life. The things they whispered into my ear set was insensible yet I somehow found myself believing their words. I looked at my own mutilated body. I didn't look like a man. My male organs had been cut off. My brain felt like it was being ripped from the inside. I was living a man-made nightmare.

The electrotherapy decreased and ultimately ceased. Just when I started to think the worst was over, I was placed in a concrete cell with only a small sky-facing window. I was not given any food for days; it may have been weeks but there was no way I could tell the

time in the lightless cell. They would slide a tray of warm food towards the window, just beyond my reach until I wailed in desperation and hunger. I was sure they would starve me to death. Then came the dreaded meal, a bowl of rotten rice infested with maggots. That was my only sustenance after seven days of total starvation. I couldn't make myself swallow the stench-filled putrid meal and vomited. I tried to seek refuge in my past, happy moments in my childhood so I sifted through the debris of my youth, trying to find a single memory that did not augment the pain I was already feeling.

It was hopeless.

The next phase of my torture was waiting for me in the cell beside me. I fellow inmate who was being brainwashed along with me was tied to a chair. The short man who was responsible for administering the electric shock into my head handed me a small knife and told me if I killed the other prisoner, I would be set free. I rebuffed their suggestion and naturally refused to kill the prisoner.

The consequence of my actions was severe. I was placed in the starvation bunker once more and this time my sustenance consisted of dead rats only. Another seven days of starvation followed. The jailer brought me a juicy burger and dangled it around my face. I begged to them to give me a morsel, a tiny bite of food, but they again took me to the prisoner next door and told me the only way I would get my meal was by killing that man.

Once more, I staunchly refused. Then they brought the captive before me and began to torture him. The guards began to amputate the helpless man's arms and legs. They threatened to cut him into pieces and gauge his eyes out. The prisoner wept in pain and agony and begged to be freed. But I couldn't make myself kill him. The guards assured me that they would continue torturing him unless I killed him. I didn't know why they were obsessed with the idea of making me kill an innocent man, that they would spend hours inflicting pain to him so that I would agree to carry out the horrendous deed.

When the guards cut off the ears of the innocent man, the prisoner begged me to end his misery. This time, I stabbed him without hesitation, running the knife into his abdomen. I could hear the satisfactory chuckle of the main jailer. He said I should have obeyed him sooner. The sadistic guards were pleased that they were able to compel me to kill a man, and they finally supplied me with fresh food and clothes.

This cycle went on for a while and I was compelled to kill more people. I don't know why I obeyed their every whim, as though I had no sense of right and wrong. I had become a robot, a killing machine. My brain was in chaos. The electrotherapy continued sporadically and after every session, I grew more confused. Who was I? What did I do prior to coming here? Where am I being kept? The questions floated through my subconscious every day but I could not form coherent memories. I was not sure if I had suffered memory loss but my mind was oddly blank and remorseless.

All I could do in those terrifying moments was pray to the God who had created me, and hope earnestly for clemency and reprieve!

In the Solitudes of Thy Heaven

We speak in silence, God and I,
As I share my every worrying cry,
There is no extraterrestrial eye,
In my hidden world where I sigh.

Heaven's sight fills the breadth of vision,
Of all my dreams and pained spirit,
With pure hope as the sole intrusion,
And restless sorrow in my heart's pit.

No hope can comfort my anguished cries,
No promises relieve these agonizing sighs,
I have suffered from that harshest of woes,
Endured punishments from friends and foes.

My soul confines the ardor of His grace,
Entreating myriad chants of devout love,

Softly as when the nightingale calls,
To my Lord upon His throne above.

My heart brims in antique fidelity for God,
I live knowing His reflective love for me,
And when the earth rolls and nights flee,
My hope renews with the morn's brevity.

December, 1993

Just as abruptly as I was kidnapped, I found myself out of my confinement-lying on a damp pavement one evening. The letters and signs on the street looked familiar. It was Thailand. I walked bewildered into a store and dialed the only number I could remember. The CIA switchboard. My memory was hazy; I couldn't remember a lot of things from my past life. But someone must have recognized my voice and asked me to wait in the exact same spot I had called from. I waited for hours until a man came and greeted me warmly. One of the first things he asked me was why I had disappeared on them for two years. I don't know what to make of the bizarre question. Why was this man insisting I had been gone away for two years? To my estimation, not more than a few months had passed since I escaped my captors.

I was flown to America on a chartered flight and escorted to a military base in Brooklyn, New York. The weeks that followed were worse than the two years I had spent in captivity. I was ordered to undergo numerous polygraph tests and had to recount every small detail from my vanished years. It was a tough activity. My brain felt like it was being torn apart.

After one of the debriefing sessions, the Army's Senior Observation instructor drove me off the base and agreed to drop me off near my home, or what I had thought was my place of residence. Until then, I had no place to live. My brain was partially wiped- my memories jumbled.

I was crumbling from the rapid pressure of this transition: moving from the darkest pit of hell to freedom in two days. The army man was speaking to me, reassuring me perhaps, but I was not hearing. My ears buzzed with the strange sound of liberty. When the man offered to drop me off near an intersection, I nodded my assent but could not bear to look at him. My eyes were watering again and I knew I would be unable to stop the tears from bursting out. Somehow, being free after so long felt a lot more painful than being locked up. I cleared my throat and exited the vehicle.

For nearly three years, I was locked in a windowless prison, where I was humiliated, starved and tortured systematically. I had lost a part of myself in there. Now, as I look up at the night time sky, I find it hard to believe it is be real, that I was really free. The favorite stars were still glittering over the city, but now they shone with a different light.

I did not have cash or ID with me but I hoped my old apartment would still be in place. I headed to central Manhattan and trudged on blindly across distinctly familiar streets.

There was a thin layer of snow on the road, but I felt deathly cold. With my worn shoes, I kept walking. Eventually, the need for sleep overpowered me and I collapsed on a roadside bench and passed out. When I awoke, my stomach ached with hunger and every inch of my body trembled from the cold. There was no comrade to receive me, no family to welcome me home. I stood at the busy intersection, gazing morosely at the scores of pathways that stretched for miles around me. Hundreds of roads- but none led to home.

Later that day, I gathered enough resolve to walk to my original apartment, hoping it was empty. It was senseless- I did not have any keys but what other choice did I have. I shuffled through the RFK bridge's pedestrian walkway, blindly allowing my contaminated memory to dictate the way home. The sun was getting dim. In the blinding rays of twilight, I saw the city I once called home. Directly across from me stood Manhattan; the high-rises glowing eerily under the receding sun.

My eyes blurred with emotion as I turned the knob. The door was locked. It was my home but I couldn't enter. With shaking hands, I knocked on the door. Once. Twice. The door swung open to reveal a large angry face. The man asked me what I wanted. I was speechless. I wanted to tell him *this* was my home but the words died in my throat. Of course, this apartment no longer belonged to me.

How *could* it?

I haven't lived there for years. For the two years I was in prison, I did not pay the rent. I had no right over this place. Overcome by homesickness, I hurried out of the building and wept into the darkness.

I must have fallen asleep at the curbside because when I awoke, it was bright daylight. I was starving and shivering from the damp coldness. I had nowhere to go. I dearly missed my mother. I missed her loving smile. For a moment, I hysterically hoped that she was alive, living in comfort somewhere safe. The thought of my mother set off tumultuous emotions in my mind. I remembered the Russian woman who looked so similar to my mother- someone who had reminded me of home when I arrived in America as a lost Russian teenager. She did not live too far from here, I recalled.

As though in a trance, I walked for another mile until I arrived at the detached, single-family house at the outskirts of Manhattan. I didn't know what to expect. The family barely knew me but I had seen on numerous occasions how magnanimous the people of that household could be. The Russian woman's husband would invite travelers, hikers, tourist and even students to his house and furnish them with homemade meals. I was counting on their habitual hospitality when after a long deliberation, I rapped softly on the oak door. A young boy opened the door. A stifled gasp. It was her first-born, a child whose birth caused me tremendous happiness and relief. I felt as though I had a brother for the first time. How swiftly the years had flown! The ten-year-old studied my bedraggled appearance curiously and asked me if I wanted food. Dazed, I nodded. He disappeared inside and shouted excitedly to his mother. He was telling her a homeless man was at the door and needed food. I overheard the woman replying from the kitchen. She was asking her son to invite me in.

Two younger boys were now at the door. They must have been the Russian woman's other two sons. Minutes later, I heard laborious footsteps in the hall way. The oldest child returned; he was carrying several disposable plates covered with aluminum foil. I frowned in confusion but he handed me the plates and asked me to come inside. I thanked him but refused to enter the house. I was a helpless stranger to them who had no right to impose upon their hospitality. The food was freshly cooked and the heat effectively sent warmth into my frosty fingers. I walked several paces from the house and sat cross-legged on the pavement. The aroma of the cooked meat and sauce wafted through the foil and I began eating ravenously.

Within ten minutes, I nearly inhaled the food. It was the first proper meal I had since I was kidnapped two years ago. The thought made me want to cry again but when I looked up, I saw the three boys huddling at their doorway, watching me- the homeless man who gobbled up food like a clown. Suddenly I felt ashamed and terribly sad. I knew the Russian woman was kind hearted like my own mother. She seemed to shower happiness around her. I felt as though the Russian woman lived for others but what right did I have to ask for her help?

I quickly got to my feet and headed to nowhere. I walked for half a mile until a side road led to a small motel. There was no other place for me to stay that night so I entered the motel and asked for a room. They handed me the keys and said I had to pay when checking out. My heart sank. I did not have any money with me. All my personal belongings had disappeared during the two years of captivity. I could not even recall whether there were any bank accounts in my name; even if there were, it would be impossible to access the funds without proper documentations. That evening, my brain was too exhausted to dwell on the future perils. I was immensely tired and fell asleep in the motel room.

I awoke early the next morning and tried to head out the front door but the night manager blocked the path.

"You are not going anywhere, mister," he said in a harsh voice. "I know your kind. I won't let you step one foot out of this motel until you pay me in full. Twenty bucks for the night."

"Okay," I tried to pacify him. "I swear- I wasn't leaving. I'll be back. Just need to head out to bring some cash from a friend."

When I spoke to him, I wasn't lying. I had fully intended to contact the CIA officers who had been interrogating me since my return to America, and ask them for a small loan. But no matter how many time I promised to return to the motel and pay him, the manager was resolute in his decision.

I loitered for a while but was unable to leave, so I returned to my motel room and waited until nightfall. Then I escaped through the window, leaping down from the narrow room in the third floor. It was one of the distressing moments for me to know that I had to leave a motel without being able to pay the bill, but I swore to myself that I would earn enough money to repay them one day.

My debriefings continued. I couldn't remember most of the things the CIA asked me to recall. I didn't know who had kidnapped me. They wanted to know why I had such high content of unorthodox medication in my bloodstream that was designed to block the action of the hormone testosterone. I did recall having to undergo feminizing hormone therapy, and my kidnappers were desperate to brainwash me into believing I was woman. But I still had no clue why they surgically removed my testicles and injected me with those drugs. Certainly, it wasn't information they were after. I neglected to mention to the Agency officers that I had killed innocent people during my captivity. I hoped to forget that episode of my life. I wished no one knew what I had faced.

A striking-looking brunette came to visit my isolation ward. I thought she looked familiar but couldn't remember her name. The woman threw her arms around me and wept hysterically. I closed my eyes and had a flashback; a long walk in a beach, playful snow

fight in the National parks, an excursion in the wild mountains of Colorado. I distinctly recalled the sound of her voice. It was Cynthia! She was my fiancée. I tried to recall more details from my past. I told her I had lost most of my memory, but Cynthia assured me she had spoken to the physicians treating me. They were positive that I was suffering from a short-time memory loss and it should all return to me gradually.

I enlisted Cynthia's help in trying to uncover the mystery of my kidnapping. I went through every event that preceded the fateful night of my disappearance. We could not come up with any clues. I did not remember the names of any of my captors. For hours at a time, Cynthia kept me company and talked about our relationship in an effort to bring my memory back. I did begin to remember snippets from the past. In order to help me remember everything, Cynthia invited me to her house for dinner. She told me how I used to go to her father's house quite often and the familiar scene might prove helpful.

With Cynthia excitedly leading the way, I warily entered the tastefully decorated house. An old man, slightly older than sixty, was waiting for us in the marble lobby. He embraced Cynthia warmly, and to answer my confused look, Cynthia explained this was her father. Richard lived in a colonial-styled manor with Cynthia. He welcomed me to his latest abode, which had high ceilinged corridors, decorated with Byzantine tapestries, and antique sculptures.

I was ushered into a massive dining area. There was an occupant present at the head of the table. I've never seen him before. He got to his feet when we entered and planted a dutiful kiss on Cynthia's cheek. Again, I stood at a side, not knowing who these people are.

"This is Noah. My husband." Cynthia told me hurriedly. "I did not know father had asked him to come as well."

"You are married?" I croaked out the words. "You said you were my fiancée."

I didn't want to sound wounded but somehow, my words came out in an accusatory tone. Cynthia looked abashed. Her husband looked back and forth, gesturing her to do the explaining. I could tell he was unhappy to see me encroach their private space.

"You were gone for two years, John. I looked everywhere. I filed dozens of missing person reports." Cynthia pleaded with me. "Noah had been beside me the entire time. He supported me during the worst time of my life."

"The worst time of *your* life?" I shouted out. All these years of torture and brainwashing seemed to be tumbling over my head. My body shook in rage at the injustice of the world. I glared at Cynthia. "You think you suffered? Do you have any idea, any idea what I went through?"

"John, I know you have been through a lot," she began.

"You know nothing!" I bellowed before catching my breath. "What I had to face every day. The brainwashing. The pain. The mind games. The only thing that kept me sane was knowing someone was out there for me. I used to think of us, our time together. And you have the audacity to tell me you suffered." I slammed my fist on the dining table so hard that the silverware jingled. "I was the one being electrocuted, starved, mutilated and humiliated in every way."

"Please, John. Please be calm. It is not Noah's fault that he is here. When you disappeared, I never thought I'd see you again so I moved on. What was I supposed to do?"

"Cynthia, you know- if it had me, I'd have waited," I said hoarsely. "I wouldn't have given up on us."

I could feel my eyes burning as hot tears accumulated over my pupils so I stormed out of the room and stood in the corridor, trying to steady my breathing. I had no right to be angry at Cynthia. We had been engaged prior to my disappearance but were not married. She owed me nothing.

But I was still pained in the heart. It dawned on me then that I was alone in this world. I lost my real father shortly after my birth. Before my tenth birthday, my mother was gone. The diary my mother left behind shed light on who my father was. I never had the fortune of seeing him, but my mother described him as an honorable man, who was a devoted Soviet politician and briefly succeeded Joseph Stalin as the leader of the Soviet Union, but soon had to relinquish power at the insistence of the rest of the Presidium. He still remained a powerful figure within the Soviet collective leadership. This man was never officially the first secretary, but he still wielded a lot of influence over many departments. In my mother's diary, I found a small journal mentioning how that man had been secretly married to her, but somehow refused to make the nuptials public. Officially, the Soviet politician was single throughout his life. In a small entry, she wrote that they argued often about the status of her marriage, and after my birth, she asked him to make their marriage public knowledge but he refused and this caused my mother severe embarrassment, because she did not want to appear in the presence of people with a child, when no one knew the real identity of her husband. Being an honorable woman, my mother decided to take a divorce from the wealthy politician and married a man who agreed to pose as my father. This man was insanely jealous of her ex-husband, and regularly got drunk and beat her. But she bore all the difficulties for my sake, eager to see that I was raised with a man who would agree to be my father. For almost two years, my biological father organized and managed Soviet defense spending and implemented changes in the industries and agriculture. I studied some of his policies and saw that he had lowered taxes for peasants and

forgave collective farms' debts. His policies were wise and many people who lived in rural areas became considerably better off during this time.

He was later placed in charge of the Soviet energy sector and remained in this position until my birth. My mother separated from him soon after and he subsequently retired from politics.

It was three years later that my mother suffered her tragic demise at the hands of my stepfather. During a violent episode of beating, the man began to beat her again, and this time, my mother had threatened to go back to her first husband, and this suggestion infuriated my stepfather and he shot her dead. I was left alone, living like a trampled orphan without any living relatives. I did not know that my real father was still searching me in the Soviet Union. But the man who shot my mother wanted to make sure my father never found me, so he seized all my identity papers and dropped me unceremoniously at the private children's house. It was not pristine like those places which were run by the Soviet government, so the level of hygiene in this shelter was less than adequate.

In my state housing, I lived among Russian children and often recalled my past.

My step-father, with all his abuse and torment, was also taken away from me when London police blamed him for my mother's death. I would be mistaken if I claim I missed the ill-tempered man, but at that time of my life, I was sure he was my real father, and I feared him as much as I hated him; hated him for hurting my mother, hated him for making her weep and hated him for beating me.

I was barely six years old. I could hear the piercing shouts. The distressing screams were echoing from my mother's room. I ran upstairs and tried in vain to open the door. It was locked. My mother was crying loudly but her tearful pleadings were being drowned out by the drunken roars of the man I had grown to hate. He was my father but I wished earnestly that he wasn't. Sharp slaps followed by poundings.

Even as a child, I knew my mother was in danger. That angry man was hitting her. From the crackling noise, I could tell that he was pummeling her frail body with his heavy fists. Outside the door, I shouted urgently: *Mamma, mamma!* I wanted so desperately to help her, to protect my beautiful mother. I had to help her; but, how? I kept calling her through the crack under the door, hoping she would open the door and let me in. I would then protect her and stop my father from hitting her.

But it was as though no one heard me. The beating went on. And on. Until I crumbled at the doorstep, shaking in helpless rage and sporadic fear. Within a few years, a new chapter opened up in my life when my mother passed away. I became a ward of the state and like a classical orphan child, I was shuttled from one place to another.

The orphanage I was sent to drove me out and the street children who I used to play with were arrested for criminal activities. When I was sentenced to death for a murder I did not commit, I had little love remaining for my homeland. The former KGB colonel who gave me a new chance of life insisted he owned me for saving me from the death chamber, but I wished I had died at the age of sixteen in the wretched prison. Every morning, I woke up at the Camp hopeless and sad because I was not dead. I leaped into the riskiest missions, the deadliest firefights- hoping a merciful bullet would pierce my heart and extinguish all the pain I was feeling.

It never happened.

I was forced to do the colonel's bidding even though I detested the assassinations he made me carry out. I was good at my job. My skill was my curse. I was a Muscovite at heart but there was nothing left for me in Russia. I was a fugitive there. A traitor who had betrayed not only his country but his friends as well.

I had no one. No friends. No family. No wife. Just when I started to believe that Cynthia was mine's, I realized she too had a life of her own. My miserable thoughts were interrupted by a phone ring. It was coming from the study room. Cynthia's father used to occupy that space all the time. I glanced at the dining room door. Soft laughter floated out of the regal dining space. Not wishing to interrupt the family dinner, I decided to answer the call and keep a message for Cynthia or her father. Clearing my throat, I picked up the receiver at the fourth ring.

"Richard, good thing you finally answered my call," a familiar voice sputtered. "We might have a problem with the subject you sent us. I am afraid the effects of the drugs we experimented on him may be reversible and that Johnny boy may start to remember things, including his relationship with Cynthia, especially if he remains in her company for too long. I did my best to wipe his memory clean but he resisted all our methods. Do you have any orders or suggestions for me?"

The man waited breathlessly on the other end of the line. He still believed he was talking to Richard, Cynthia's father, the man who had saved me from the Russian spy agency and recruited me to work for him. I held the receiver away from my ear and tried to think. The man's voice did sound uncannily familiar. He was one of the masked physicians who carried out the surgery of my body and removed my testes. Was he really acting on the behest of Cynthia's father? Did Cynthia know? Was she on it with him? Was it Richard

Cynthia visited my residence less frequently after that conversation and I was able to spend more time with my friend Dustin and undergo mind exercises to regain the lost memories. I was making progress and often became inundated with unexpected flashbacks. It was a helpless feeling- not being able to remember where I had been for over two years, what I had done or experienced, how I survived. Part of me wanted to forget the two years ever happened and part of me desired to face the reality. I was hoping for a closure.

In addition to helping me recover my memory, Dustin always had some news to share, even carrying newspapers with him. One of the first headlines I noticed was about a war raging in Europe. The bold ink read: *In War for Bosnia, the Only Winner Is Despair*. I was totally clueless. And confused. I distinctly recalled going to Serbia in 1989 with Cynthia. We had averted the war that was threatening to ravage the region. Why would the newspapers suggest that there was a war going on in Bosnia? Dustin hastily explained to me that several months after I disappeared, the Serb President Radovan Karadzic initiated a war with Bosnia and ordered his troops to conquer Srebrenica, a U.N. designated safe area. It was there that the Serbian general Ratko Mladic, massacred tens of thousands of Muslim males. The worst genocide of modern history was taking place in Sarajevo while I was locked in cage, being brainwashed at the behest of Richard. The injustice of these events was staggering.

I returned to my previous work place and began to download the remaining intel I had missed since my disappearance. While I was making copies, Cynthia called me over the phone, asking if I wanted to go out with her and have dinner; I could not refuse. Dustin had encouraged me to spend more time with past associates. He believed it would help jog my memories. I agreed to the time and place and during lunch break, purchased a teal colored blazer to wear to the dinner. Before I left, I wanted to get a secondary opinion.

"Hey, man, you got a minute?" I called out to the balding man who was hurrying past my door.

Curtis McDonnell stuck his head in. "What's up, John?"

"I just remembered- before you joined the intelligence department, weren't you a part time editor of a fashion magazine?"

"It was a long time ago," Curtis said, dreamily studying the ceiling. "Any particular reason you remembered that piece of information?"

"Yeah, I am taking Cynthia on a date- like an official one, so what do you think?" I stood to display the blazer I had purchased for this occasion.

Curtis looked me up and down. "It's hopeless," he said with mock horror. "Hey, just kidding. You could have opted for a slim-fit blazer but this one flatters your body. Good choice."

"You think?"

"Absolutely. You'll rock and your girl will be elated."

"Cynthia's dad is not cool with this, obviously, but I can handle him. He's a nice guy."

"Nice? I *know* how dangerous Richard is!" Curtis blurted out. "I was a low-level data analyst at the NSA when Richard was brought in with much fanfare."

"Brought *in*? From where?"

"From East Germany. I thought you knew."

"I knew he was originally from Austria or Hungary," I told him. "Richard mentioned once he was born in Germany."

"Well, the part he forgot to mention was he worked with the East German secret service for many years."

"He was Stasi?" I could not believe what my colleague was telling me.

The data analyst nodded. "For ten years. Then he supposedly defected to the Americans, claiming to have a lot of information. The CIA treated him with kid gloves. Thought Richard carried a gold mine in his head. His name was Reinhard but he worked her under the pseudonym Richard. He ratted away a lot of his former East German partners and helped the US intelligence to identify a number of double agents in America. That helped jumpstart his career. The guy's been flying through the roof ever since. And running his own criminal empire."

"Come on, Curtis, I know that guy." I protested lightly. It pained me to hear Richard's reputation being tarnished. "He is going to be my father-in-law. He can't be that bad."

"You have no idea, do you? I was there when Richard started his little black ops group." Curtis McDonnell took a deep breath before confiding in me. "He recruited skilled men from the counterintelligence bureau and made them do side jobs for him. He told them it was sanctioned by the State Department."

"They were legit then?" I said.

"At first, yes, but Richard was siphoning off funds from Agency accounts to offshore banks accounts that were registered under aliases."

"How do you know he was taking money?"

"I am an analyst, remember?" Curtis sniffed audibly. "Besides, Internal Affairs conducted three separate investigations into Richard's financial dealings. The Director of the NSA wanted to suspend him but was overruled by the Agency. My guess is Richard used that money to hire mercenaries to do his dirty work."

"He wouldn't break the law," I insisted.

"Then how do you explain what he did in Langley this month?"

"What are you talking about? What did he do?"

"Richard was being investigated for a data breach that killed three of our senior agents. The director found a lead and subsequently a special session was convened to address the identity of the culprit."

"Who was the mole?"

Curtis McDonnell looked distressed. "We'll never know, because Richard shot the suspect."

"Shot? As in with a gun?"

"Yes, shot point blank. Inside the conference. Front of the head of all the departments."

"Who did Richard kill?"

"The deputy director Mills of clandestine operations. He was sitting at the conference table with everyone else. Richard entered the room, pulled out a gun and shot him."

"What about security?" I inquired. "No one tried to stop him?"

Curtis furrowed his brows. "That old dude sealed the doors electronically after entering. After killing the deputy director, Richard showed the rest of the team evidence that Deputy Director Mills was in fact the mole because the phone that was in his pocket had a lot of stolen data on it including details of a bank account with illegal wire transfers."

"So, everyone thought the deputy director of clandestine operations was the mole?"

"Yeah, and lucky for Richard, they were so pleased to see how efficiently he identified the culprit that they actually promoted him. Raised his clearance." Curtis chewed his lips. "I mean what kind of an insane person executed a high-ranking intelligence officer right in the middle of a conference room? And he told his colleagues that if he didn't shoot Mills right away, there would have been a catastrophic disaster somewhere in America. He convinced them he acted for national interests."

"I can ask Richard about this- I mean, I don't believe he would kill someone in cold blood without a good reason?"

"Without a reason? John, listen to yourself. I know you are dating his daughter and you probably have a soft spot for him, but I knew Deputy Director Mills. Richard killed an innocent man. Mills was the most honest fellow I've ever met. He wrote my recommendation letter for grad school."

"Sometimes we think we know people-" I began.

Curtis raised his hand. "No, no, I know him in the sense I have access to his personal server. Last year, Deputy Director Mills gave me his passcode because I needed to run some diagnostic test on his network. There is something I found when I sifted through his communiqué. Right after I heard about his death, I mean."

"What did you find?"

"Mills left a voice message on the White House switchboard. I couldn't make much sense of it, appeared cryptic, but the deputy director was requesting a meeting with Monika Kudlow, who is the assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor. He mentioned something about identifying a high-ranking mole inside the NSA." Curtis paused. "Then what a surprise. Hours after he left this message, Richard kills him."

I didn't know what to say. What Curtis said did ring true, but how could I prove that Richard was indeed the culprit who killed the deputy director of Clandestine Operations in order to protect himself from being accused of the crime?

The data analyst sighed and clapped my shoulder. "Anyway, I got work to catch up. Thanks for letting me vent, man."

"Sure, anytime."

I helped Richard bring down the colonel and eliminate the last remnant of his Camp and training centers in East Germany. I thought it was the right thing to do. The former KGB colonel was after all a rogue agent who was unaffiliated with any government agencies. He was acting independent of the Soviet government and was wanted not only by the US government but also by Kremlin and London. But after the Camp was destroyed, I realized that *this* was Richard's endgame. He wanted the Colonel to give up so that he could assume unrivaled power. Like the Soviet Colonel, Richard ran his own little camp, using the American government's resources to fund his Black Op division within the NSA. But alone, he made little progress. My Soviet colonel used his vast superior resources and double agents inside America and Europe to undermine Richard's effort to gain global prominence.

Richard knew he would never be able to become powerful, not as long as the Soviet Camp was functioning so he looked for someone who was vulnerable, someone who would believe in his cause. He used me to neutralize his greatest rival so that he would be unchallenged in the criminal world. There was no one else to check his advance, to halt his activities, to monitor his transactions. The Colonel, though he acted irrationally, was a believer in global peace. For the two decades he was in control of world governments, he did not allow any major war to break out.

By the time I managed to completely neutralize the Camp and bring the key players down, it was early 1990s. I was relieved my job was over. The rogue group had been shut down for good and I believed that the world would now be a better place.

But my relief was short lived.

I felt as though life had tossed me over the broken bridges of the past. I was reliving the nightmares I had dreaded the most.

On August of that year, the world woke up to hear about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The Gulf War had begun. It was followed by the Persian Gulf War. Chaos continued to brew in the Middle East and the Balkans. Soon after, the Serbian invasion of Bosnia filled the news. It was eclipsed by the Rwandan civil war. The genocides in Africa were heart breaking. The South Ossetian War was claiming thousands of lives in Georgia until a Russian-brokered ceasefire ended the bloodshed in 1992. I knew if the Colonel was in power and had a functioning army of elite agents in his Camp, he could have halted these wars. He would've sent a handful of his finest men to eliminate the warlords or assassinate the men responsible for starting the bloodshed and place a loyal agent in the upper echelons of those governments.

While his methods were often unorthodox, and required extrajudicial killings, the Colonel believed he was acting in the interest of the people by assassinating war lords and gang leaders who were indirectly or directly involved in starting wars and carrying out genocides. I never thought a day would come that I would come to regret my actions but I had.

After the Camp was disintegrated, I watched helplessly as the wars broke out and horror unfolded.

I saw how Europe got out of control. The instigators of these wars and violence had free reign.

I remember my time at the Camp. The Colonel would often select me to carry out the most difficult task such as capturing or eliminating a political or a candidate who was a war hawk. Oftentimes, I hesitated to kill the men in cold blood so I would bring them to the Camp as prisoners. But I regretted doing that instantly. In order to extract information, the Colonel would have his interrogators torture them for information. Many of those prisoners died after the questioning sessions. I felt guilty. When I captured them, I believed I was saving their lives, not condemning them to a fate worse than hell. I can never condone all the illegal things the rogue KGB colonel did in his Camp, and his unjustifiable actions caused me to turn against him and collaborate with his enemy to bring him down, but I only wonder now, whether the world would have been a better place had I remained at the Camp- if I had never met or helped Richard.

January 18, 1989. I remember the date so vividly. I had gone on my first date with Cynthia. I was captivated by her beauty and compassion.

She was real. A soulful human. My love for Cynthia filled my heart and somehow, we could spend hours in each other's company without speaking and yet understanding everything. I considered myself quite lucky to be able to find someone like her in my life. Despite her father's apparent displeasure at our union, I was thrilled with the prospect of spending the rest of my life with her.

I remember the conversation we had on our walk back to Cynthia's home.

"Can I tell you something?" I had whispered in her ear.

Cynthia nodded laughing.

I said, "Would you believe me if I told you that if we lived up to hundred, I would still love you?"

"I don't know," Cynthia said playfully. "I guess not."

"You are right," I had replied. "Because with each passing year, I would love you more and more, until there wouldn't be another couple in the world who could love one another so desperately."

"Wow!" Cynthia was saying.

I didn't know what she thought of me, but at that moment, I felt I had to speak the truth and tell her what was in my mind. I had meant those words with utmost sincerity.

I had hoped to spend the winter with Cynthia but her father had other plans. He called me to his office and handed me a folder. It was a mission summary. He asked me to carry out an important task for him. I was supposed to extract an asset from East Berlin.

"East Berlin?" I protested weakly. "That place is crawling with Stasi."

"I know that," Richard said irritably. "Which is precisely why I am sending *you* in, John. You are the only trusted person I know who speaks German. You are also aware of the terrain. How often did your Colonel send you to East Germany?"

I tried to remember the exact number but failed. “There are numerous auxiliary units of the Camp inside secret locations within the German state,” I informed him. “There is a recruiting center in the Lichtenberg locality of Berlin. After the Colonel rescued me from prison, I was sent to East Germany. There was a medieval castle in Brandenburg that served as his headquarters. Nearly all the recruits were required to stay there for one year.”

Richard looked a little surprised. “I was under the impression that the Soviet officer conducted his rogue operations from Moscow?”

“Negative. While there was a Camp in Voronezh, it was a transit place. Most trainees were shipped to the German Democratic Republic right away. The Colonel felt it was risky to operate under the watchful eyes of the KGB’s Alpha directorate.”

“I see.” Richard flattened his ashen lips.

Not wanting to be unhelpful, I hurried on. “I can find a pretext and stop by one of the sites, but that would be too risky. If the Colonel found out I was there without his order, he would get very suspicious.”

“Which is why you won’t make contact with the KGB affiliates,” Richard said firmly. “I will assign you a guide. He will make contact with you in a safehouse in Sachsen-Anhalt. From there, you will be led to the prison complex where our asset is trapped. It’s a clean operation. If all goes well, you can be in and out in four days.”

Of course, at that time I had no way of knowing that by this time next year, I would witness the reunification of Germany.

Richard gave me the address of his contact in East Berlin and supplied me with relevant documents for the journey. When I landed at Schönefeld Airport, a driver was waiting to take me to my safehouse. I felt nostalgic to be back at a place where the only memories I had were of tense training and mock warfare exercises. The Colonel believed East Germany was the ideal place to train to become global warriors.

When I arrived at the safehouse, my guide was eagerly waiting for me. He was a wiry fellow, deluged with curiosity. He bombarded me with questions about life in the United States. His diminutive stature and open expression put me at ease. For the duration of our trip, he told me to address him by his code name, Max. The guide accompanied me on our first train ride and gave me new copies of the S-Bahn map. I was impressed to see that everything in this region looked exactly as it was years ago when I had trained here under the iron supervision of the Soviet colonel.

We halted at the Schillingstr. stop and disembarked. I turned to look for my guide but he was gone. As I made my way to the exit, seven plainclothes men accosted me. I attempted to ignore them as continue on my way, I was stopped by a firm grasp of a hand upon my shoulder. The man held up a paper.

“*Ministerium für Staatsicherheit.*” He spoke with authority and gestured to a waiting car. “*Bitte.*”

My heart sank as I realized I was being taken into custody by the Stasi. Even Soviet officials looked upon East German communist government’s secret police with distaste. Their fearsome tactics and interrogation skills gained notoriety and surpassed their Nazi predecessors.

I should have been comforted by the fact that I was inside the Soviet zone of occupation, but realization dawned on me that I was not here as Soviet spy. I was an American who had been sent to retrieve an asset. My identity had to remain unknown.

I closed my eyes and went over the specifics of my false identity in my mind. I was Andre, a Frenchman who had come to purchase antiques. I was not a spy. I wondered how Max was faring. My gentle tour guide was nowhere to be seen. He had conveniently disappeared moments prior to my arrest.

A Stasi police noticed me craning my neck and looking for my friend. “Your Max,” the man said in German. “He did his duty well. You needn’t worry.”

With a sinking feeling in my heart, I realized that my tour guide was the informant. He had betrayed me to the Stasi, East Germany’s feared secret service. My captors did not speak afterwards.

Inside the foreboding concrete complex in Berlin-Lichtenberg, two members of the *Staatssicherheitsdienst* resumed their work. I knew that the KGB had stationed liaison officers in each of the fifteen Stasi district headquarters around East Germany, but I had no way of alerting them. From the interior settings of the prison, I deduced that I was being held in the infamous Hohenschönhausen complex that was known for making people disappear. For three weeks, I was interrogated rigorously, but I maintained my cover story. The beating was so severe on the first day, that the burly guard had knocked out my front teeth. I was certain my left arm was fractured. I feared the worst; that I would die in here, and disappear under a false identity within the grim walls of this concrete citadel.

The questionings continued but I could not tell them I worked for a Soviet black ops division that had sent me to spy on Americans. Giving them this information would mean they would try to verify it by contacting my Colonel. This alone would have jeopardized everything I worked so hard to achieve. The Colonel would wonder what I was doing in East Germany. He had not sanctioned any missions in the German Democratic Republic and would suspect me of being a double agent. If he reexamined all my actions in the past

three years, he would find out the discrepancies in all the missions I had carried out for him. He would realize I was the mole. And he would have me executed.

I knew I was very close to bringing down the Colonel along with all the sectors of his Camp, so alerting him of what I was up to would destroy everything I had accomplished. It would have temporarily freed me from the communist prison but at a cost I was unwilling to pay. I maintained the cover story Richard had rehearsed with me prior to flying to Europe. He mentioned there was great police presence in East Berlin and should I get caught, I should maintain my fake identity and try to escape, because rescue was out of question. The prison officials refused to believe I was a French national by the name of Andre even though I spoke flawless French.

Had I known that the Berlin wall was to collapse within months, my fear and apprehension would have been much tenable, but at that time, I really believed there would be no reprieve, no rescue. For days, I was left in a dark isolation cell, with no human contact. It felt like living inside a tomb.

One week later, Stasi police began to suspect they had made a mistake. My beating would lessen occasionally when I demonstrated native level skills of the French language. From their facial expressions, I could tell the Stasi agents who were questioning me knew I was telling the truth but they did not want to believe me.

Twice, I was allowed to spend several hours among the general population. It was both a relief and burden. I was able to speak sparingly to other prisoners but also had to witness remnants of the horror they had to undergo.

It was during a brief walk, I kept pace with a young man. He had long dark hair and curious eyes. I was surprised when he spoke English. He had a very British way of speaking.

When I introduced myself, the man's eyes lit up. "You're English, mate?"

I nodded, afraid of saying it aloud lest the diligent guards could overhear.

He stretched out his hand for me to shake. "Ian Godfrey."

"Andre." I told him my assumed name and resumed walking.

Ian was studying my face closely and lowered his voice. "They really roughed you up, Andre."

I nodded, covering my bruises with my hair. My limp straw-colored locks were matted to my cheeks. "The Stasi think I'm lying to them."

"How long you've been here?" The British man inquired.

"Two weeks. I don't know if I'll last much longer." I glanced sideways at him. "Where in London are you from?"

"Surrey. My parents lived there but I moved to North London for my training."

My eyes brightened at the familiar name. "I was born in Tottenham. It's where my mother is- now."

"I've been to Tottenham loads of times. You finished school there?"

Suddenly, the thought of my birthplace made my heart ache. London was my childhood. It was where I lived with my dear mother. I could not think of that place without reviving the memory of those darling days. It renewed the hopeless feeling inside me; reminding myself of how much I had lost. When I told Ian my mother is in Tottenham, I was not lying. She was there. She lived and died there but to me, my mother could never be dead.

Eager to change the subject, I asked Ian why the East German police were holding him in custody and what he had been charged with.

Ian frowned abruptly. "The Germans know who I am," he said unhappily. "They showed me a copy of my SIS dossier."

"SIS?" I was surprised to hear that the young man worked for the Secret Intelligence Service. "What are they going to do to you?"

The British man turned pale. "If I am not exchanged, they'll execute me."

I gasped so loudly that another prisoner nearby halted in his tracks. "They can't just kill you!" I protested.

"It's the espionage business," Ian said resignedly. "I don't have any more intel to share with them. They've squeezed me dry so I'm not worth much to them."

"British Intelligence will swap you, right?" I pressed.

"Like I said, mate, I'm not that valuable an asset. Unless my partner in the West side captures one of the Stasi undercover men, then there is no hope." Ian bowed his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "These blokes won't have any reason to keep me alive much longer."

I looked at his pale frightened face. The young man was trying to maintain composure, speaking in rapid sentences that fell over each other. He was full of life and energy. I didn't want the British intelligence officer to die. There was so much ahead of him.

"What if you had more intel to share?" I said thoughtfully.

"I don't, mate. Secret Intelligence Service always have a contingency plan in case one of us got taken. We fight off interrogation for a few days- then tell them everything. This gives our boys in London to change all the access codes, and move out from the safehouses. I don't have any other information."

I narrowed my eyes. "Yes, you do, Ian."

The British man froze in his spot. His jaw dropped. "I don't understand."

"Listen to me very carefully," I began.

For the next fifteen minutes, I made Ian memorize a series of sixteen-digit numbers, with the relevant code words. It was the access codes for my numbered bank accounts in *Gosbank* and *Vneshtorgbank*.

Ian shook his head wildly. "I don't even know what those words mean."

"Don't worry about it. I have personal accounts in the state owned Gosbank as well as the Foreign Trade Bank. There isn't much in there, but each time they take you for interrogation, give them the combination of one of the banks. Jumble up the numbers occasionally. Tell them you forgot most, but the memories are returning."

"But why?"

"I know how communism works. If they think you have money stashed in various bank accounts, they'll want a share and keep you alive a bit longer- enough for SIS to come up with a plan to get you out."

Ian looked stupefied. "But what about you?"

"Don't worry about me," I answered. "I'll try to break out. Remember, the last three numbers I told you belong to accounts in Sberbank. The numbers ending with three zeros are accounts in Staatsbank. They should be happy to get those. I gave you the number of one more- the fourteen digit one. Don't give it to them right away. It contains hundred thousand marks in my Frankfurt-based Bundesbank account. If you manage to slip into West Germany, you can withdraw it and purchase essential supplies to make your way back home."

Ian suddenly grabbed my forearm. "Why are you doing this for me?"

"I don't want you to die, mate, that's all. Now go before the guards get suspicious."

"Listen, Andre, I'm going to think of some other ways to break out of here. Then I won't need to use your bank account numbers."

"Even if you manage to escape, keep an eye out for the HVA," I warned my new friend.

"What's the HVA?"

"*Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung*," I informed him. "It is the foreign intelligence service of East Germany. Stasi conducts its foreign espionage operations via this department."

For the next nine days, Ian Godfrey was kept alive. The Stasi officers even gave him an extra jacket to wear. I was pleased to see they did not harm him. The intel he was supplying them consistently paid off and his life was momentarily spared. I desperately hoped British Secret Intelligence Service would have him released before the interrogators discovered that he didn't have any further information and was dispensable.

Two days later, I noticed Ian appeared unusually boisterous. From the narrow window of my cell, I could see that he was carrying a small satchel filled with his belongings. Two Stasi guards were leading him to an armored vehicle. I prayed ardently that he was being exchanged for another prisoner and not being led to execution. My companion had assured me he had contacts in the West German intelligence who would try to secure his release or arrange an exchange. I hope it was the case.

I knew the Stasi and the KGB had hundreds of informants inside West Germany's domestic intelligence agency but that knowledge did not help. Even if I knew the identities of those double agents, I had no feasible way of sending word to them for help without compromising my delicate position within the Colonel's elite organization. I knew the exact location of a clandestine Soviet military establishment. It was two kilometers north of the Stasi building. But going there would blow my cover and jeopardize my mission. My only hope was to wait for my captors to get bored and eventually release me. I tried my best to make them believe I was a French entrepreneur and art collector, but if they somehow suspected I was working for a secret American black ops group, I would be shot within hours. These thoughts were depressing so I did not dwell on them much.

Twelve days had gone since Ian Godfrey was led away from the *Hohenschönhausen* complex. I tried to speak to one or two of the prisoners but they were mostly East German dissidents who had tried to escape to the West.

My interrogation resumed after a two-day break. After one rigorous session, a German prison doctor inspected my broken rib and had prescribed rest for me, but now the recess was over.

Pain wrecked every joint of my body as I tried hard to suppress my tears. Somehow, in these dire situations, the thought of my dear mother flooded my memory. I wished I was dead, so I could live in bliss in the afterlife with my mother, the one person in the world who had loved me unconditionally.

It is not fair that they have left the world while I am condemned to grieve the loss of loved ones alone. Death would have been so much easier, so much more peaceful than the dreadful existence I am surviving in. Every gloomy day passes over me, and the memory of those I loved haunts and vexes me, until I cannot bear the agony of separation any more. My friends, my dear mother, my beloved family- they were all suffering or were dead!

How did they ever have the luxury to leave this world? They are sleeping quietly in their graves, without a single worry to wake and bother them. It is so hard to pity those dead people who have left me, and who bade this world a final farewell. I envy them when I think that those deceased friends of mine are not suffering from despair, and it is I who am being forced to live in utter darkness and sadness instead, and have to face the horrors of my life with unshed tears.

The nostalgic thoughts gradually receded.

I was bound tightly with heavy chains and made to lie on a metal gurney. The interrogators poured ice water over my face as they asked me who I was.

The questions were redundant. I clung to my cover story and replied in French. Then an older man appeared. He listened intently for a moment before grabbing my jaw and tilting my head around. I could feel the blood draining from my face. Did he recognize me from somewhere else?

His maroon eyes bored into mine. I tried to maintain a poker face but my forehead began perspiring. I felt he could tell I was not French. There might have something about my face or bone structure that gave away the fact that I was Russian.

As abruptly as he approached me, the old man let me go. He barked an order. The prison doctor rushed to his side. They were out of earshot so I read their lips to discern the conversation that was taking place. The older man was instructing the physician to prep me for surgery. They seemed to believe I was withholding information and that an experimental brain surgery would enhance neurostimulation and make me divulge my secrets.

Minutes later, my gurney was being wheeled into an operating room. It must have been the prison infirmary. Two men in full length surgical gown were prepping a table. Overhead lamps blazed mechanically. A slightly hunched man, who I assumed to be the surgeon, removed his face mask and gave me a toothy grin. I dreaded what was coming and struggled desperately against the chains. But they were too tight. The two assistants lifted me to the operating table and strapped my arms and legs with leather belts.

I pleaded with them to give me some time, but the elderly surgeon leaned over me and spoke in a soothing tone.

“Do not worry, young man. We are going to carry out a simple procedure. You should not be afraid.”

“What are you going to do with my brains?”

“It’s a minor operation that promotes neuro stimulation. And prods your mind to recollect events you may have otherwise overlooked or failed to share with us.”

“Is the surgery invasive?” I asked, trying to keep my breathing steady.

“We will drill a hole in your skull and use a cranial shunt to drain the water from your brainpan- this should be painless. And once you became unconscious, I will remove the skullcap and begin neurostimulation.”

“How?”

“How we stimulate the brain?” The surgeon raised his snowy eyebrows. “This tube will pump in air and increase the intracranial pressure of your brain. I’m afraid it will make you feel as though your brain might explode. But that is just a stimulated feeling.”

I didn’t want to show fear as I asked. “Are there going to be side effects?”

“Although we have not tested this procedure on enough people to say with certainty what the after effects might be, but the two subjects who survived suffered permanent brain damage. And long-term memory loss. So, you may forget the languages you learned as a child.” The German surgeon chuckled. “No need to look so afraid. I’ll be much more careful this time.”

My heart raced so furiously that I thought I would die of a heart attack right there.

“Please don’t.” I begged the doctor, but he adjusted his disposable bouffant headcap and lowered the oxygen mask over my face. The surgeon’s assistant began to insert the anesthesia into my blood stream.

I began to feel drowsy as the drugs started to take effect.

Then I heard a loud crashing noise. I wanted to open my eyes but felt too exhausted.

I heard a scream.

Then gunshots.

Adrenaline kicked in and I suddenly felt awake. Someone was removing the leather restraints from my legs. My arms were free. I reached up and yanked the oxygen mask from my face. The room was filled with residue from a colored smoke bomb.

I sensed multiple people wrestling and grunting in pain. The surgeon's assistant was leaning against my gurney. He raised his gun towards the intruders and prepared to fire so I swiftly grabbed a hypodermic needle from the surgery table and injected the entire content of the syringe into him. He fainted instantly.

The smoke cleared. Someone was helping me to my feet. From the corner of my eyes, I glanced at the hand around my shoulder. The pointed scar was unmistakable.

"Ian?" I breathed.

The British man grinned down at me. "You alright, mate?"

I nearly collapsed in relief and gratitude. Ian Godfrey made me lean on him as he led me to a short cut through the infirmary towards a service tunnel.

"Okay, lads, we split up here. I'm taking Andre to a safehouse. The rest of you head to the SIS rendezvous point."

I had at least a hundred questions to ask my British friend, but Ian asked me to rest until I was feeling well again. Then he told me exactly what had happened.

Due to the stream of intel he was consistently supplying his East German captors with, they decided to postpone his execution, until SIS made an offer to exchange him for a Stasi officer who was arrested in West Germany.

After returning to London, Ian Godfrey was debriefed and sent back to Germany to gather intelligence. He told me how he made contact with the West German officials, and was able to borrow one of their inside man for this job by offering him the money in the numbered bank accounts I had given him access to when we were cell mates. The Stasi official who was working for the British intelligence used the money to hire a small rescue team consisting of five East German dissidents.

Prior to storming the prison complex, they had acquired intel that I was scheduled to be moved to the infirmary for a surgery so Ian waited until I was taken there. He knew security was most lax around the medical service center and the extraction would go ahead without much complications.

I was immensely grateful to the British agent who saved not only my life, but my memory. Until today, I shudder to think what would have happened if the surgeon was able to proceed with his surgery. If the rescue team was even a few minutes late, I may not have existed anymore. Would I have remained brain-dead forever? Thanks to my dear friend Ian, I never had to find out.

For the next few months, we kept in touch. Ian was the first to congratulate me when the Berlin Wall came down. The reunification of Germany was victory for all, especially the British Intelligence officers like Ian Godfrey, who had to suffer in the hands of the communist police.

It was good to see change was coming.

I was glad that chapter of my life was over.

July, 1994

The beginning of the year 1994 was most difficult for me. I became embroiled in a transnational terrorist scheme that Richard had been funding with his whitened illegal money. It was shortly after he had found out about my adopted family, who were very nice and gentle people.

I had known this Russian woman and her husband since my arrival to the United States.

I would live across the street with several other expatriates. Two other Russian families lived in this neighborhood, and the woman who looked like my mother would sometimes send food to me and my roommates. I remember a time when one of my roommates was coughing from a seasonal American flu, and the Russian woman saw us, and sent her husband with several trays of food and baked milk. I was touched by her consideration and I knew if my mother had been alive, she would have taken care of me in this exact same way. I later saw how the woman and her husband both were very kind-hearted. She would stay indoors most of the time and take care of her children while her husband would go around each neighbor's house and ask them how they were doing. I was impressed by how humble her husband was. He liked to take care of all the strangers in the area, and provided food and shelter to homeless and poor people. In the few years that I was living in their neighborhood, I noticed the Russian woman adopted several orphan and foster children. I felt very grateful to know this Russian woman and her family. It made me feel as though I was still in Russia and was living among loving relatives.

My comfortable life did not last for long, however, because soon, the woman and her husband started to have several biological children and they moved from New York to work on a new job. Her husband became very busy after finishing Ph.D. from Princeton University, and I saw them less and less, but the memory of that family lingered fondly in my mind. They were an opposite pair of people, with the wife very passionate and loud all the time, but also extremely caring, and her husband always speaking softly and agreeing to everything. I cherished those memories and hoped they would be a part of my family forever.

But during one weekend when I visited the house of my adopted family to see their sons who would play in the park garden, I noticed Richard had me followed. He also tried to have that family killed, because somehow, he thought the Russian woman and her children were related to me. But that family hardly knew me, personally, and I merely wanted to believe they were my extended adopted family. My adopted mother's husband was from East Pakistan, and he would sometimes take his little boys to Muslim religious temples, but I never went there because of my deep Orthodox beliefs. However, Richard was misled, and he thought I followed the Pakistani religion. He thought I was Muslim, and now he wanted to take revenge on me by hurting all Muslim nations and people. He had already tried to destroy my mother's homeland in Grozny, and Richard also gave backing to the war in Sarajevo where Bosnian Muslims were killed in thousands. But that was not the end of his anger and vengeance.

He had something much worse planned.

A month before Richard set his plans in motion, he expelled me from his black ops unit and told me to take a vacation to Europe. I became suspicious and planted several non-detectable hearing devices in the NSA black ops headquarters in Maryland. From those recordings, I was able to find out what Richard had planned.

He was actively recruiting mercenaries to place bombs in the basement of four FBI buildings in New York and Michigan. He wanted to detonate those bombs and frame local Muslims for those crimes.

I also saw that Richard used his black ops operatives to kidnap several Muslim and Arab American men, and forced them to make five propaganda confession videos in which they admit to blowing up certain buildings. It was strange, because at that time, those buildings were still intact. But it was through these recordings that I was able to figure out and identify the targeted buildings Richard had intended to blow up.

I was shocked to see the location of the attacks. It was the heavily fortified headquarters of the American Federal Bureau of Investigation.

I immediately contacted several senior FBI special agents and warned them that someone was trying to bomb their buildings, and frame the Arab-American community for it. Most of the agents thought I was playing a prank and was joking.

Only one person believed me. It was the FBI Deputy Director Margaret Hine. She was an elderly woman but extremely spirited and brave. She sent regular State Police to investigate and search those buildings and the State Troopers were able to arrest one man who was caught while trying to rig the first floor of the FBI building with powerful industrial-grade explosives. When the police interrogated the culprit, he admitted that an NSA black Ops chief had hired him, and the plan was to detonate the bomb on Friday so that everyone believes Muslims carried it out. The FBI Deputy Director also discovered the rest of Richard's plot. He had planned to blame the attack on the Muslims and make the U.S. government arrest all the Muslim Americans and lock them inside concentration camps.

When Richard got word that his plan failed, he was furious, and he tried to stop Deputy Director Hine from investigating and exposing his crimes, so he kidnapped her daughter and told her to drop this case.

Margaret Hine contacted me to let me know her daughter was missing, and I personally searched for the little girl and finally found her hidden in a factory that was rigged with explosives. It took me eight hours to deactivate the bombs from the pressure plate, before I could rescue the Deputy Director's daughter.

I was able to prevent Richard from blowing up all the FBI buildings, but I needed all the help from the wonderful and kindhearted woman. I was impressed to see how the FBI female director went against her boss, and continued investigating the case even after her daughter was kidnapped by Richard.

Sometimes, one strong woman can be braver than a thousand men.

It was not until the end of 1994 that I was able to return to Serbia and disable their missile launching system. It was too late by then. Serbian nationalists had destroyed and killed countless civilians in Sarajevo. Serbian forces were targeting Bosnian towns, carrying out a ruthless ethnic cleansing. The Muslim-led Bosnian Government was in shambles. They had no arms or manpower to fight against the Serbs. Nearly three million people lived in the territory that was managed by an inadequate Bosnian force. They all faced imminent annihilation.

Thousands of Bosnians and Croats died already; millions were homeless refugees. The men were imprisoned in concentration camps while their women were forced to work in brothels. I couldn't believe the world could change so much in such a short time. In the

two years that I had been disconnected from the outside world, too much damage was already done. I reached out to a private banker in Bangkok who had access to my funds. I had him wire a large sum of money and hired a team of mercenaries to infiltrate into Serbia's armed forces. I needed to know who the players were before I tried to end this war. Another of my close contact at the Agency worked at the White House. I shared my findings with him and gave him a copy of the report which proved that the Serbian generals, backed by Russian tanks and weapons, were planning to seize the whole of Eastern Europe, effectively pushing Russia and America into the brink of a very hot Cold War. Evidently, my message reached its intended recipient and on August of 1995, the Clinton administration decided to intervene decisively in Bosnia. An ugly war had finally been halted.

I did not forget the telephone call I had inadvertently received while dining at Richard's house. I was determined to find the identity of the man who was speaking on the telephone so I went back to the house when it was unoccupied and placed intercepting wires on the telephone set. It would allow me to trace where the call originated from. Waiting in a parked van across the house, I listened in on all the phone conversation that Richard was making. I kept a recording of the phone calls as evidence and found out that Cynthia's father was involved in many shady dealings including the organization of an Eastern European human trafficking business and Chinese organ harvesting industry. This explained how he had so much wealth. It was not normal for a director of the NSA black op division to have so much money at his disposal. Five days into the phone interception, I received the besought call. The man who had kidnapped me on the direction of Cynthia's father finally contacted him again. This time, I hung on his every word.

The conversation was brief but long enough for me to trace the call. The point of origin was in a medical equipment storage sixty miles from the house. I jumped into the driver seat of my surveillance van and drove to the given address. The compound was heavily fortified with electrified fences surrounding the perimeter. I used the pliers from my tool box to cut a hole inside the fence and managed to enter the facility without raising an alarm. The interior was remarkably casual, almost like a vacation resort. A coat closet was lined with pressed uniforms. I grabbed a lab coat and threw it over my shoulders in an effort to blend in. There were indoor playground and gym in the lab. I walked past dust-free corridors that led to nurseries and classrooms. A door was ajar. I could see several nurses bustling over a newborn. I waited until only one woman remained and then entered the room.

Five infants were asleep in their respective cots. I demanded to know who these children belonged to. The nurse, who looked terrified to see an unidentified male in her nursery, refused to give me any information. I told her I was the chief inspector sent from the government. She said she only knew that these children belonged to a very influential man who used surrogates to have lots of offspring, but the man who was in charge of the internal affairs was the manager, a Dr. Garret.

I nodded, processing the information. "Where can I find the manager?"

"He is usually in his office, on the East Wing of this facility," the nurse said. "All the technical proceedings go on over there. We deliver the child here but the lab is next to the manager's room."

I thanked the nurse but before leaving, I ran a hand gently over the child's head and secured three or four strands of hair. I had to know who these children belonged to.

When I returned to my studio, I received a call from Dustin. My old comrade from the days in the KGB colonel's Camp had reached out to me and was conducting his own investigation into the real culprit behind my disappearance. He offered to help with the DNA testing of the samples I collected from the medical resort laboratory. I mailed all portions of the children's hair to him and he cross referenced the results with the previous tests I had conducted, including Cynthia's DNA sample as well Richard's, the man who persisted in playing the role of her father. The same afternoon, Dustin called to tell me about the bizarre test results that showed on his machine.

The children whose hair sample I had brought from the lab were a hundred percent match with Cynthia. Meaning, those children belonged to my former fiancée.

Wild thoughts raced through my head and even though I didn't think those children were mine, I begged Dustin to tell me if he was able to positively identify the father of those dozen children. He didn't reply right away and instead gave an evasive reply. I continued to berate him until he mumbled that the paternity of the children was unmistakable. Richard was the father of all the children in the medical lab. My mind reeled from shock. Cynthia was Richard's step-daughter. Yet, there are dozens of children being born from surrogate women, who have been fathered by Richard, and using none else but his own step-daughter as the biological mother. I didn't know what to say.

When I regained my composure, I called Cynthia and told her to meet me urgently. I gave her the time and place and collected all the evidence from the recorded telephone conversations as well as the DNA report on the lab children. I waited.

Cynthia didn't interrupt me as I spoke. I explained all the discrepancies I had found out about the medical laboratory. I showed her all the lab reports, but carefully left out the part where the paternity test results was displayed. I knew it would break Cynthia's heart to

find out the man she considered to be her very own father would ever steal her DNA and give surrogate children from her. The only thing I mentioned was that those children had her DNA and were her biological children.

Cynthia did not seem too surprised by the fact; she recalled an operation she had to undergo at the direction of her family physician, Dr. Garret, who suggested that her ovary needed to be partially removed. The timeline of Cynthia's ovarian surgery coincided with the surrogate birth of those children. Cynthia was horrified to see that so many children had been born using her eggs and she begged me to tell her who the father was and who was responsible for carrying out this flagrant act. I pleaded ignorance but Cynthia seized the documents from my hand and read the report in its entirety. Fortunately, she was unable to find out who the father of those children was, as I had discarded those pages before bringing her in this lab. I disliked keeping secrets from Cynthia but I also didn't think she was strong enough to handle the ugly truth.

Nevertheless, the fact that her eggs were seized without her permission made Cynthia livid with shock and anger, but I was more concerned that the physician was the man who had kidnapped me and had me tortured for two years. It was slowly beginning to make sense-Richard's obsession with Cynthia, his loathing towards me. I could understand why the old man was angry but to think he would go to such lengths to keep me apart from Cynthia was perplexing.

Truth seems to come out no matter what. For me, it was a lifeline. I had to know what I was dealing with. When I was taken to the Soviet training Camp to be forced into a world of espionage, I knew where I was and what was expected of me. There were no false hopes. The colonel made it crystal clear the very first day that he would 'cancel' anyone who wasn't performing at their maximum level. Failing a mission wasn't an option. Living in fear was overwhelming but there was no personalized attack on me or any of the recruits. When I became sick of carrying out unsanctioned assassinations for the colonel, I tried to leave the group but as per his ground rule, anyone leaving the circle was to be canceled.

I fled to America under the pretext of going undercover and spying for him and found refuge with the director of NSA's Black Ops program, who happened to be Cynthia's father. He agreed to help me in exchange of information about the Camp and its sleeper agents who were stationed in the United States. The man also got me acquainted with two KGB operatives who acted as my handler as we worked together to bring down the criminal organization I was part of. I was willing to pay any price to escape from the suffocating Camp life and readily agreed to betray by former colleagues. My treachery did not go unnoticed. The colonel sent his best hitman to kill me. I was being hunted. Every alley became a danger zone for me. On my morning runs, I used to double back every block to lure out potential killers. Some of the assassins who were trying to kill me were fellow recruits I had trained with. We were bench-mates and even friends. Nothing mattered anymore. They knew if they didn't do as the colonel ordered, they would be next on the target list.

The present-day world was not as black and white as I had hoped. I was constantly being thrust into impossible situations and bizarre incidents- such as the medical lab that I had inadvertently come across. Cynthia accompanied me to the place and was petrified when she saw the interior of the medical laboratory. She inspected the nurseries and found her uncanny resemblance in several children. Most were toddlers. They were being cared for by professional child care specialists.

Inside a domed structure at the rear of the lab, we discovered close to a hundred incubators. After much coercion, a lab technician admitted that these were new samples of the same batch of fertility supplies. A log book noted that the mother of these children was Cynthia and the father was listed as *classified asset*. For the first time in years, I saw Cynthia shriek in frustration and anger. She grabbed a fire extinguisher and used it to smash all the glass bowls that were fitted to the lab's machine. She didn't want any more of her reproductive eggs to be used by the obsessive pursuer and went to her father for help. She knew Richard had contacts in the CDC and NSA who would be able to find the identity of the children's father by conducting authorized paternity tests. I tried to dissuade Cynthia from going to Richard because I felt the truth would break her immaculate heart, but Cynthia persisted.

When she confronted Richard about the medical lab, he dismissed all the evidence and said I was a criminal and a liar who have manipulated his Cynthia. He began to show her all the evidence of my past crimes; detailing all the assassinations I had carried out under duress while at the Camp. Cynthia returned to my studio the next day and confronted me with the photographic evidence. She drew out her gun and aimed it at me and said she would turn me in to the police. To her, I was a common murderer. I begged her to use reason. I explained everything about my past and how the rogue KGB colonel used a lethal microchip that was implanted in the base of our skulls to control us. If we didn't kill the bad guys, we would be executed instantly. I told her Richard knew who I was and what I did for a living and that is why he agreed to help me get out of the Soviet training Camp. He knew I was not a cold-blooded killer but he was making Cynthia believe that I was inherently evil.

Somehow, Cynthia understood my position and she holstered her weapon and decided not to call the police. But she also didn't want to have anything to do with me and informed me that she was seriously dating a colleague at her work place- and was glad that he was an honest man and not a killer like me. I was stunned and tried to tell her that Noah had died only weeks earlier and whether she should take things a bit slowly but Cynthia brushed off my concern and left the apartment.

I don't know what Cynthia did after that but I think she went back to her stepfather and demanded an explanation for my history in the espionage business. Richard admitted he knew about my past but he showed her another video. Cynthia once more got convinced that I was guilty and rushed over to my place. She played the video in my computer. This one was time stamped. It was *after* I had left the Camp.

In the video, I am standing in a room holding a steak knife. Then abruptly I plunge the sharp edge into the abdomen of a frail prisoner who was bound to a chair. The scene looked vaguely familiar. I realized that this was during my two-year captivity during which time I was brainwashed and tortured repeatedly. After starving me for an entire week, my captors compelled me to commit the murder after threatening to torture the man to death by cutting off his limbs, piece by piece. When I refused with the previous man, they tortured him to death Infront of me saying it was my fault he was suffering. I kneeled down and begged and cried but they said it was too late, and not to make the same mistake again.

I didn't hesitate for a second with the next man. Someone had been videotaping everything and the fact that Richard had access to the video feed suggested that he may have been behind my abduction.

I told Cynthia what I thought really happened, but she still wanted me to surrender to the authorities and face charge for murder. I knew it wasn't an option and I fled the apartment. It was around this time I heard the fateful news. Cynthia's new boyfriend Tim was found dead in his workplace. The corner ruled the death as suicide although failed to identify the type of poison used in the death and police refused to open a homicide investigation because Tim had left behind a typed suicide note claiming he did not love Cynthia. I suspected foul play- what were the odds that two of Cynthia's intimate partners should die within months of each other, in seemingly inexplicable circumstances?

Someone was playing tricks on the good-natured young woman. Richard could not bear to see anyone getting close to Cynthia and was probably trying to do everything in his power to chase all men away from her life, but who could it be? I needed to know. So, I enlisted the help of Dustin yet again and requested him to give me a copy of all the security camera footages in Cynthia's workplace. Dustin was happy to oblige until he discovered that the cameras were scrubbed. No photographic evidence remained in the building.

My head reeled in shock. Who would go to such lengths as to destroying video footage from all the security cameras in order to cover up a suicide? But I had to find out what had really happened to Cynthia's boyfriend so I went to the site to investigate. The room in he committed suicide had a large window, angled to the street side. I glanced out the window and noticed there was a conveyance store directly across the clear glass. If I could access the cameras that were facing the streets, perhaps it would have a copy of what had transpired in the room before Tim died.

Two days later, I managed to retrieve several lengthy surveillance videos and with the help of Dustin, I was able to zoom in on the office building that was across the store's security camera.

The scene that played before me appeared to have come from a bad horror movie. In the afternoon shadow, the video showed a figure move inside Tim's office and after what seemed like an hour of deep discussions, the man neared his desk. At this moment, the camera was able to capture his face clearly for the first time. It was the unmistakable square, lined face of Richard. What was Cynthia's father doing in her boyfriend's office? Seconds later, I found the answer.

Richard proceeds to open a water bottle and offered the contents to the young man, who peculiarly refuses the cordial gesture with a vigorous shake of his head. At this, Richard abandoned the niceties and forcibly poured the liquid down Tim's throat. Moments later, Tim lay prone on the marble floor of his office. He appeared dead. The camera shows Richard placing a crisp paper on the table and leave the office as purposefully as he had come.

I was not as stunned by the events as I ought to have been because by this time, I had some idea how violent Richard could become. Cynthia's stepfather had gone as low as to kidnap me, remove my male organs and inject me with high doses of female hormones all because he despised me being intimate with his stepdaughter. Her latest boyfriend, Tim, paid the ultimate price. But Cynthia was oblivious to her stepfather's evil deeds. She believed he loved her and was protecting her. I wanted her to see the truth so I called her to my apartment and showed her the video. Cynthia refused to believe the footage was real but after I verified the video's authenticity, she broke down into tears. Her questions were hysterical as redundant: why would her beloved father want to kill her boyfriend.

I tried to console her but it was pointless. In a frenzied move, Cynthia rushed out of my apartment and got into her car. I thought she was not calm enough to be on the road so I accompanied her. She drove straight to her father's house. Richard answered at the first ring and opened the door. He welcomed her inside and was offering condolences over Tim's demise but Cynthia raised her hand and slapped her stepfather on his face. Richard looked taken aback and staggered but Cynthia kept hitting him with all her strength. At this, I felt I had to intervene and tried to grab hold of Cynthia's arm.

Unable to hit her stepfather any longer, Cynthia squirmed to get free and faced her stepfather. "You killed Tim! I saw it!" She shouted.

When Richard didn't reply, Cynthia screamed again. "Don't you dare deny it! You were in the office when Tim died. I know it. Why?" She wailed louder. "Why would you do it, daddy?"

Richard looked as though he was going to cry. "Sweetheart, I had to. It was to protect you."

At this, my face flushed with anger. I remembered he had said the same thing many years ago when he killed Cynthia's biological father in a senior center.

"You killed an innocent man, Richard, and it had nothing to do with protecting Cynthia." I said coldly, keeping a restraining hand on Cynthia's shoulder.

"Don't you tell me how I should protect my own daughter," Richard spoke icily to me. "I believed Tim would have put Cynthia's life at risk so I did what any father would have done for his child. I killed him to save her."

The conversation was becoming redundant. I became disgusted at Richard's insistence that he had to kill Tim to protect Cynthia that I left his house and returned to the hospital that had registered Tim's death. The morgue still had his body for a secondary autopsy so I slipped inside and secured a sample of his blood. If Tim was really poisoned, I had to know what kind of toxin was used to kill him. It would give me a clue as to who had supplied Richard with the spiked solution.

I sent Tim's blood sample to the CDC's Office of Laboratory Science in Anchorage. They mailed me their results a week later. The poison Richard used to kill Cynthia's boyfriend was a variant of *Novichok*, a Soviet-era nerve agent that had not been manufactured in Russia for decades. Furthermore, the lab in Omsk where *Novichok* was first developed was decommissioned by the Russian government and shipped off to a storage location in Kazakhstan. Members of American military intelligence was known to have seized the shipment and moved the lab to the Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, where the nerve agent was being produced and stockpiled in a controlled environment.

The military nerve agents like *Novichok* were capable of killing subject within minutes after exposure. As a result, the production of such poisons had been restricted in many countries but the Central Intelligence Agency reserved the privilege of holding on to some quantity in order to neutralize Cold War era enemies stealthily. It was the easiest way to eliminate undesirables while blaming the killing on Russia, since they had publicly manufactured it decades earlier.

The use of poison in the death of popular or controversial figures tended to gesture towards Russian involvement and the CIA seized on this opportunity more than once to eliminate threats or cause rifts in the relationship between America and Russia. This was hardly the first time an Agency or NSA officer had adopted this dangerous course.

I had to facilitate emergency meetings three times in the past decade, between British Intelligence and the Russia's *Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti* so they could clarify misunderstandings about the alleged murder of several political dissidents who had been living in England on exile. The Russian nationals appeared to have been killed by some sort of poisoning and the MI6 was quick to accuse the Russian government to have carried out the attacks but after painstaking investigation, I was able to prove Russia had no involvement in the poisoning of either the two former officers of the Russian Federal Security Service or the five Russian opposition activists.

One of the leading activists was later treated in Berlin where German Federal Intelligence Service agents discovered that one of his own aides used non-fatal dose of poison on him to bolster popularity and to undermine the sitting government of the Russian Federation. I was relieved to know that the man recovered completely.

The Deputy Director of the FSB later confirmed that they had arrested two Finnish saboteurs in Moscow who were planning to administer the same poison to another outspoken government critic in order to show the international community that the Russian government was systematically murdering political opponents. Fortunately, the plot had been thwarted in time by the Russian intelligence but they did not find out who had masterminded the operation.

The poisoning of the Russian opposition party leader provided the impetus for the media to focus fear rhetoric on the migrant Russians living in Britain. Although within weeks, the allegations of poisonings were dismissed by English courts, damage had been done. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc had dispelled fear of a nuclear war but skirmishes continued between the Russian government and Western Europe. When I defected from the Camp a decade earlier, I hoped by permanently removing the last remnant of the rogue KGB Colonel's operations, it would restore some of the trust that had been lost after the false poisoning allegations.

Cynthia was devastated by the loss of her boyfriend so she embarked on a journey of retribution and told me to hand her a copy of the video that incriminated Richard in Tim's murder. Since the footage was not acquired legally, the evidence from it was inadmissible in court. Meanwhile, when Richard found out Cynthia had filed an unnatural death report with the police, he publicized a false report about Tim's demise, claiming that Russian agents assassinated him using a banned chemical from the Soviet era. Although the news was far from true, popular media hung on every word of that bulletin and began to rerun the story.

I could not believe Richard would spread such heinous lies about Russia so I contacted a Dustin and asked him to find me solid evidence that would dispel such rumors. I also got in touch with the Deputy Director of the FBI's counterintelligence division and shared Richard's video with him. Once he saw that the former Director of the NSA's black op division had killed Tim in cold blood, he agreed to open an independent investigation and declared on the Bureau's news bulletin that Russia had nothing to do with the poisoning.

It was common knowledge that anti-Russian rhetoric used by popular media such as television and newspapers served to heighten the fear of Russia to critical levels and contributed the UK and the United States to implement anti-Russian legislation. This caused a plethora of public policy changes in the United States that adversely affected Moscow, but I hoped by proving that Russia was not involved in the poisoning, I could help normalize the relationship between the two great nations. This was not an easy task since anti-Russian sentiment was still embedded in the fabric of US society.

The rhetoric had a strong impact over a malleable population who readily believed that the Russian government was a cold-blooded killer that had nothing better to do than execute political opponents by feeding them radioactive or nerve agents. To make matters worse, the American and British public seemed ostensibly predisposed to accept Russia as terrorist state and gladly accepted the poisoning narratives. Some ambitious senators and congressmen rallied on this point to elicit support in order to maintain the status quo where they could retain political and social power over their constituents.

When Cynthia's stepfather found out I was exposing his lies about Russia, he left an anonymous tip at the CIA's switchboard claiming I was person responsible for the poisoning of Tim. I felt as though my life was untangling all over again. I was being hunted so I went underground, using a small group of trusted sources to funnel in the money I had saved while working with the former KGB colonel. There were millions of dollars available in various foreign banks but I was still trying to bring them in to the America so I could use it to purchase property, transportation or weapons. When Richard tried to contact me, I ignored his calls. He threatened to mail a copy of my financial records to the U.S. Department of Treasury if I didn't meet him immediately and help him out with procuring several artifacts from a black-market art collector. I ignored his existence and continued to organize my life.

Two days after Richard tried to contact me, I received a small package in my mail box. It was a pair of Cynthia's earrings. There was a typed note attached to it which mentioned that she had been abducted. The kidnappers gave a list of demands. They wanted me to acquire the prototype of a new satellite that the US Air Force was constructing.

"The Navigation-9 satellite?" Dustin repeated, when I told him what the captors demanded in exchange of Cynthia's freedom.

"Why do they want it, Dustin?" I wanted to know. "What is so special about this satellite?"

"It hasn't been built or launched yet," my hacker friend replied. "There is only one prototype; it exists inside a hardened cavernous bunker in Chicopee, Massachusetts. No one can enter without the highest authorization."

"It's an air force base?"

Dustin nodded. "More precisely, the bunker is the command post for the 8th Air Force. As for the satellite in question, it is totally next gen material. The technology embedded in it allows it to function in a GPS-denied environment. The Air Force's research laboratory designed this high-tech space communications system in order to make this satellite hack proof."

"How can something be hack proof?"

"The N-9 incorporate RF and visual sensors and passes the data directly into a ground receiver. The satellite is fitted with multi-directional antennas that can adjust to avoid interference while transmitting RF signals. The way this bird avoids getting jammed by external sources is by using a software-defined radio that switches waveform. Like I said before, it is a cool gadget."

"And if the bad guys get their hands on it?"

"They could launch missiles from anywhere on earth and we would be unable to hack into those fiery trajectories and stop it."

Dustin paused. "These satellites are ideal for sending signals in high-threat combat space environments and it's cool if the USAF keeps these in possession but if a rogue group gets their hands on it, they could defeat NORAD's jammers and strike anywhere."

"Now I understand why Cynthia's captors want to get this weapon," I said slowly. "Dustin, keep working on the note- see if you find anything, any clue as to where it was printed. I want to try to rescue her without meeting their demands."

"Whoever took her are professionals," Dustin said unhappily. "I've run it through every form of tests. Still don't know where they are holding her."

"Look Dustin," I entreated. "If I don't deliver the prototype, they will kill her."

Dustin paled.

"I will retrieve the prototype from the secure air force base," I explained, "and the next time they contact me, I'll tell them I am ready to make the exchange. Then you will have to embed a time-activated tracker on the item. Once Cynthia is safe, activate it and I will recover it and return it to the US base."

“How will you get into the bunker in Chicopee?” Dustin said worriedly. “You remember what I told you about the level of security there.”

“Yes, and I also know there must be a weak point in the structure. Dustin, can you pull up the blue print of the military base?”

The Russian hacker shook his head. “It’s not so simple. Only hard copies of the blue print exist.”

“Where?”

“Inside the Roosevelt Building in New Haven. The security there is heavier than the White House. You’ll need the highest authorization to enter the storage room of that facility.”

“Get me an ID of a maintenance personnel. I will enter the Roosevelt Building, retrieve the blueprint of the bunker and then get the prototype. And Dustin, hurry. If the kidnappers think we are stalling, they might hurt Cynthia.”

The next twelve hours had been the most strenuous time for me. I struggled to maintain composure and managed to retrieve the prototype the kidnappers had demanded. It was heartbreaking not to know whether my beloved Cynthia was unharmed or still alive. I had no external help and the captors strictly forbade enlisting the help of the police or the FBI. I knew there was only one person who would be willing to help me discreetly and save Cynthia; her father. So, I called Richard and begged him to help me locate Cynthia and apprehend the kidnappers. Richard agreed and offered to make the exchange while he tasked me with surveilling the site and remain at a distance as his back up. I hurried to oblige.

Cynthia’s captors made contact at midnight. They gave the coordinates of a location in South Jersey and told me to leave the prototype under a park bench in Staffordville. Cynthia was going to be dropped off by a van as soon as their man on site confirmed that I delivered the original item. The exchange proceeded as per their directives but Richard intervened and insisted I be present at the South Jersey location and receive Cynthia while he would deliver the satellite prototype to the captors. I did not question his call and told him where Dustin had planted the tracker. I showed Richard exactly how to activate it. He assured me it will be done and urged me to pick up Cynthia.

Cynthia was shaken but unharmed. I found her bound inside an Audi in the exact location the kidnappers had told me. I was immensely relieved to get my dear Cynthia back in to my life. When I questioned her about who her captors were, Cynthia insisted she had no idea. She had kept blindfolded during the entire duration of her captivity. However, she was not hurt or molested in any way. I was thankful that the ordeal was over. The next day, Dustin informed me that the signal from the tracker was never activated, so he had no way of finding out where Cynthia’s kidnappers had transported the item. My heart sank. I had taken one of the most valuable items from the United States military and inadvertently delivered it to terrorists who may use it against US interests. Now we had no clue where it was.

I remembered specifically asking Cynthia’s father to activate the tracker, so I called him on a direct line and demanded an explanation.

“How dare you question me?” Richard said hotly, his voice reverberating over the phone line.

“Why didn’t you activate the tracker on the satellite prototype?” I repeated. “It was the US government’s only piece. Now, thanks to you, they lost it.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Richard yelled. “I didn’t activate the tracker because the kidnappers would have swept it for bugs, and if they even suspected a foul play in my part, they would have killed my daughter.”

“You know very well the tracker was a passive one,” I reminded him. “It would never have been detected.”

“It was my call,” Richard said, “and I felt it was safer for Cynthia if I removed the tracker from the device.”

“You removed it?” I couldn’t believe it. One of the most valuable objects from the US Air Force was gone.

“I don’t need to hear your complaints,” Richard continued in a chilled voice. “If it wasn’t for you, my daughter’s life would not have been in danger in the first place. It was your fault that she was kidnapped.”

I felt my jaw drop in surprise. “Sir, how was it my fault?”

“Because evidently, the kidnappers wanted something from you so they used Cynthia to get it. So, from now on, I am ordering you, if you care about Cynthia at all, you will leave her alone.”

“I love Cynthia,” my voice broke, “and I will stay with her whether you approve it or not.”

“If you love my daughter, you will break up with her,” Richard said loudly.

“What?”

“Make her despise you,” Richard clarified. “Do anything and say anything that will make her hate you. That’s the only way you can keep her safe. If she stays away from you, the attempts on her life will stop.”

“You are insane?”

“Am I? All I know is that her life came under threat because of her association with you!” Richard thundered. “I am warning you. Never contact my daughter again. She needs to have *nothing* to do with a lunatic Russian like you!”

Even hours after Richard slammed the phone, I couldn’t think clearly. What he was saying wasn’t making sense. I didn’t believe that the kidnappers took Cynthia because of me. They were not supposed to know we were a couple. We had been so discreet.

However, the conversation with Cynthia’s father gave me the incentive to get as far away from him as possible. I disabled my phone line and flew to Chitré, a coastal city of Panama.

Dustin accompanied me to my new home. I didn’t worry about not having enough cash on me because I was able to collect roughly four hundred million dollars from the side missions with the colonel. During training years at the Russian black ops training Camp, Dustin and I had worked as a team to collect and whiten the money before securing it in Thai and Nordic banks. The only dilemma I now faced was to bring in the cash to the United States and transfer it to unmarked dollar bills.

I enlisted the help of several people whose life I had saved in the past-while I was working as an assassin for the Soviet training Camp. The colonel would give us names of the targets he wanted to have assassinated but a few weeks into my field work, I started to take things into my own hands. Killing people in cold blood was not something I was willing to do so I made deals with the intended victims and hid them from the colonel after faking their death.

When I was first rescued from prison, the colonel who identified himself as a former Soviet military intelligence chief officer, gave me a brief speech where he claimed to be an emissary of the various intelligence groups inside the Soviet Union. I found no reason to disbelieve him. I honestly wished every word he spoke was true. My previous years at the Siberian orphanage did not provide me with pleasant memories. For years, I, along with several dozen orphans, languished in a prison-like lodgings where icy winds and sleet would seep in through the large cracks on the wall and mice would trample over our thin bodies. I was under constant attack by lice, scabies, and frostbite and the only protection I had from the bitter winter chills was a threadbare blanket that was infested with bugs and lice.

Aside from a handful of fellow orphans who treated me with warmth and kindness, my world was empty, without hope of happiness. Naturally, I ran away from the abominable abode and found myself embroiled in yet another kind of hell. This one was more formal. I ended up in prison for a crime I did not commit but the courts decided that at sixteen, I should be tried as an adult, and so they passed judgment and announced the sentence. Death by lethal injection.

For the second time in my life, I felt utterly helpless. Surrounded by thick stone wall, I was drowning in despair. I did not want my life to become extinguished in the ominous hall of the death chamber, condemned as a criminal, friendless and despised. Choking in my tears, I prayed to all those I loved- I could not stop weeping when I thought of my mother. She had died in order to save me and I was going to die anyway. What failure! At the orphanage, the priests would say the deceased can see us from the other world. If there indeed existed another world, was my dear mother watching me? Did she have any way of knowing that her son was to be put to death? I had no clue. The idea was so painful that I willed my mind to go numb. There was only emptiness and fear in my young heart.

My prayers were answered, or so I thought.

I died, yet was alive.

The elegant Colonel who had rescued me from the jaws of death offered me a second chance; a disciplined life in which I could make things right again. His thin aristocratic face glowed with patriotism as he assured me his training Camp was a secret branch of the Soviet intelligence. During the probationary period, I was trained vigorously. By the thirtieth week, I had completed the weapons training and knew how to use a machine gun. The recruits were shipped off to a fortified castle in East Berlin where we were taught land navigation, demolitions, unarmed combat, cold weather training and close-quarters combat.

The instructors demanded absolute obedience. I despised the forced servitude but did not dare question their commands and immersed myself in learning rope skills, language courses and sniper courses. I was demurely proud of my achievements. During recess, I could see the training instructors commenting on my exceptional performance. I was told that my clearance was upgraded. I would soon join the ranks of senior Camp officials, which meant my next appointments would be to be based abroad.

Mikhail explained to me how the Colonel manages this powerful organization. He trains recruits to be fluent in dozens of languages and furnishes them with false identity before sending the young men and women to infiltrate the British MI6, Argentine’s *Secretaría de Inteligencia*, West Germany’s *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, French Intelligence, Canada’s RCMP Security Service, American pharmaceutical companies, and the CIA.

I was ecstatic to be part of such an elite team, but after I moved to America, I realized the Colonel had deceived me as well as the other recruits. He was not an official member of the Russian internal or foreign intelligence services. He had indeed been a colonel in the KGB but had gone rouge years ago and opened his own private Camp where he trained convicted criminals and used them to carry out missions for him. Because most of his recruits were officially dead or permanently incarcerated, the Colonel considered them

dispensable. I too was sent under heavy fire more times than I can remember and while many of my comrades died left and right, I somehow always survived.

Every time I left the Colonel's underground bunker, I would think this would be the last time I saw the open sky. But there would be another mission, another person who needed to be eliminated. And so, I began my own parallel missions- to save those condemned men and women that had been marked to die. Carrying out those counter-missions were not an easy task because if those people the Colonel asked me to assassinate showed up alive at any other location, he would have sent other equally adept recruits from the Camp to eliminate them. Sparing their lives alone wasn't enough. They needed constant protection. I needed huge amounts of money to hide them, fake their demise and keep them somewhere safe.

Oftentimes, my efforts were futile because when my targets were discovered to be *undead*, another Camp recruit would be sent to finish the job.

The Colonel watched his agents diligently, leaving little room to conduct side missions. If I had been caught doing extra-curricular activities, he would not have hesitated to cancel me. It was a huge risk for me but all the dangers I had to brave felt worthwhile when I visited the orphanage in Siberia. The number of children were increasing each year and the wooden huts could not accommodate them effectively. I looked forward to the monthly visits where I would have the opportunity to hand blank checks to the caretakers and request them to build stone houses that would shelter the orphans from the bitter winters.

I knew every child had the right to live in dignity and comfort. They had a right to a proper childhood. Every month, I would go to my original home to assess the progress of the housing project. I remembered the scarcity of food I had faced when this was my home so each month, I made sure to bring truckloads of supplies for the children. There would be enough fresh fruits and snacks to last several weeks.

Those orphans who were raised with me were scattered across the Soviet Union and lived in miserable conditions. I sought them out one by one and managed to open secure bank accounts for them so they could begin life anew. Some were in prison for various petty crimes - they had been driven to steal and swindle due to harsh poverty- while others lived in dilapidated buildings akin to prison complexes. I later found out that the children with disabilities were mostly transferred to closed state institutions for adults when they reached eighteen years of age.

It was heartbreaking to see the emotional and loving children I grew up with languishing in adult institutions, away from their loved ones, having severe restrictions on their freedom. Some staff at government-run institutions had the habit of forcibly transferring children with disabilities to adult institutions on their eighteenth birthday.

Many had been moved into those places without consent. I invested a significant portion of my newly earned money to hire disability rights lawyers and medical professional to assist them.

A significant portion of my money was spent in trying to save people who had target on their backs. They needed false papers and new identities to evade detection by the Colonel so I volunteered to furnish them with the forged documents. I was not able to save everyone. Some of the victims would refuse to forsake their loved ones and remain in hiding while others would panic and attempt to escape unsuccessfully via conventional means. But those who I did manage to save- they considered themselves indebted to me. One person who had expertise in money laundering agreed to wire in my money. It wasn't enough and soon, the IRS flagged one of my contacts and I had to cease contact.

Meanwhile, Richard sent out security alert in my name so that I would be arrested in found. I fought back legally, hiring corporate lawyers to whiten my money and wire them inland. Richard began to use Cynthia to bait me out but I thought it was a better idea to keep her on my side. I sent her generous gifts and jewelries. I hired a florist to send her flowers every day. The best boutiques in the city would send free samples of their latest designer clothes for her and her two daughters. The twins were now eight years old. They were delighted to receive boxes of gifts each day. In addition to packages, I had hired shoe makers from Milan would pay Cynthia weekly visits.

Cynthia was overjoyed and she soon wanted to move back in with me. We began our relationship anew but this time, I moved with guarded confusion because I was not the same person who had fallen in love with Cynthia. Her twins were growing up quickly. They were smart children. One day, when Elsa asked me if I would be their new dad, I was at a loss for words. Her sister Jessica advised Elsa that I would probably be their mother's boyfriend.

The nine-year-old spoke with such authority that it made me smile. I knew only one person who spoke that way. I studied the girl's chocolate brown eyes. It did look very much like Richard's. The same shade. I ran my hand over the twin's head and told them to play outside. That afternoon, I phoned Dustin and gave him a sample of the girl's hair. I needed to conduct one last test to put my suspicions to rest.

Two days later, Dustin called me. For a moment, the hacker didn't speak. Then he said, "How did you know?"

"It is his, isn't it?" I said tightly.

"Positive match. 99.99 percent." Dustin sounded frustrated. "The twins are definitely Richard's. What the hell was the old dude thinking? Making his own daughter pregnant?"

"Cynthia is actually his stepdaughter. And yes, it is horrible. I am more concerned on how Richard pulled it off? How could he make Cynthia pregnant with twins and she not know anything about it?"

"Do you want to ask her?" Dustin said.

I sighed. "No, telling Cynthia the truth would destroy her. She wouldn't be able to handle it. The man she loves as her own father – that he could do something so gross... Any way, thanks for the info. I'll be in touch."

After I ended the call, I went to see Cynthia. She was eager to go on a date with me. I could see happiness radiating from her. She was so proud of her beautiful daughters that I didn't want to ruin her happiness by informing her that somehow, while I was kidnapped, her stepfather managed to impregnate her via artificial insemination.

Instead, I told her what had happened during my captivity and how her stepfather was behind the changes my poor body had to endure. I showed her my body, explaining that Richard had ordered surgeons to remove my male organs so I would never be able to become intimate with her again. Cynthia was furious with her father for doing this to me and she promised me she would love me regardless and vowed to stay with me. She wanted to prove to Richard that he couldn't control her life anymore.

Six months after Cynthia moved in with me, I woke up one morning to find that she was gone. There was a note written on the bedside table. It was hurriedly scribbled note that mentioned Richard. Cynthia's stepfather was terminally ill with a rare form of radioactive poisoning and had hoped to see his daughter again before he died. Not wanting to leave her alone with the old man, I drove over to Richard's estate. Inside, I found him lying on a veranda. His face was pale and there were liver spots on his face and neck but he didn't look like he was going to die. Cynthia was in the kitchen preparing soup for her father. I froze when I saw her. Her clothes were peculiar.

I cleared my throat and asked, "Cynthia, why are you wearing a dress from the '60s?"

"Oh, John, I am so glad you are here. Did you hear what happened?"

"Richard is sick, I saw that." I said.

Cynthia shook her head. "It is so much worse. I just spoke to the doctor who is treating him. Daddy was inspecting a radioactive plant when he was exposed to a burst of radiation. He'll die, John, if we can't get a cure."

"Is there a cure?"

"Not really, but daddy, I mean Richard told me during his days as freshman officer in the Agency, he and my mom did a mission in Ukraine where he saved a scientist from the Soviet security forces." Cynthia said tearfully. "My dad thinks the only person in the world who knows how to reverse the effects of this poisoning is this Ukrainian physicist."

I didn't speak so Cynthia came closer and lowered her voice. "I know it is asking a lot, but daddy has always been good to me. He did unforgivable things to you but he was like a real father to me and always tried to protect me. Please. I can't let him die."

I nodded. "Tell me where the Ukrainian guy lives. I'll bring him here."

"That is part of the problem. The radiation is affecting dad's brain. He is not being able to remember the location he hid the scientist at. It was a long time ago. Around 1960."

"Wait, is that why you are wearing this dress? Cynthia. Tell me what is going on!"

"Please don't be angry. The family physician tried to get daddy remember the location of the Ukrainian scientist but he thinks he might be able to remember if he went back to that time frame."

I craned my neck and noticed the floral drapes around the ornate estate. "And these decors. They have all been changed as well. The house needs to look like it belongs to circa 1960. I still don't know why you are dressed in the miserable dress."

"Daddy thinks if I dressed like my mom, his subconscious would imagine that I am Ekaterina. Then he would be able to recall the exact events that took place on their mission in Ukraine."

"I don't like this." I stated flatly. "How long do you have to pretend to be his wife?"

"It's not like that," Cynthia protested. "I just want him to be cured, John."

I ignored Cynthia's pleading and left the ridiculously decorated room. It was a little nauseating for me to see my girlfriend in her stepfather's house, dressed in clothes that had belonged to her mother.

Richard did recover from his supposedly fatal illness and he was successfully able to recall the name of the miraculous Ukrainian physician after Cynthia dressed as her mother Ekaterina and tended to him for a week. At this point, I suspected that Richard had faked his sickness in order to get Cynthia away from me but I had no proof of this and stayed silent.

I was in Richard's office one afternoon when one of his colleagues, who was a former FBI agent, came with his two daughter and young son. I remembered that it was daughter's day, so most fathers brought their daughters to work. Cynthia arrived soon after with flowers, which she presented to Richard. I was impressed by such civilized customs and joined them for a cup of coffee in the office pantry. We were speaking casually, when without warning, the two teenage daughters of the FBI agent began to accuse me of molesting them. I was very surprised because the children looked so young, I found it hard to understand why they were lying about me. Police showed up thirty seconds later, and I was very shocked by their presence. This whole charade appeared to have been planned. I did not know what to do, so I protested my innocence and told the police that there had been a mistake, because I never even saw those children before in my life. Richard did not speak in my defense, but his lips curled slightly in a mockery of a smile. He paused eating, his eyes glittering in apprehension, as he watched the American police handcuff me. I continued to protest but the policemen grabbed me roughly and handcuffed me in front of Richard and Cynthia. Then they dragged me to the police car, as Cynthia looked on with utmost horror. I shouted as loudly as I could, begging Cynthia to believe in my innocence, but she just shook her head and walked back inside to the office building.

Prison life was terrible from the first moment. The police chief identified me as a Russian and his demeanor was bitter and cold. He accused me of being an uncivilized brute, and fellow cellmates who were sharing the holding cell began to berate me endlessly after finding out I was a Russian national. I was not overly surprised by their treatment, for during my years of living in America, in addition to physical and sexual torture, I was constantly facing insults. Many times, ordinary Americans who deduced from my accent that I was not a native of their country used profanity laced rant excessively when addressing me. Other referred to me using racial slurs and derogatory terms reserved for Russians. In my personal life, these incidents were slowly building towards a crescendo of anxiety. I knew that victimology was something that was utilized as the optic for public feeling, framing each episode of Russophobia through the supposed deficiency of the victims and inability to predict who might be next. Universalizing by virtue of proximity, it felt as though I was not alone in this treatment, but all Russian citizens were under attack, and lived in the United States under a totalizing sense of being under a psychological blockade.

Two days later, I was still in the prison holding cell, trying to convince the guards to allow me my phone call, but they refused, and did not appoint any attorney to represent me. Just as I was beginning to feel hopeless, I noticed a pudgy short man in a large overcoat enter the prison corridor. He whispered a few words to the guards and they allowed him to approach my cell. When he got nearer, I immediately recognized him as Richard. He seemed to have aged in the last two days, but I had never been more glad to see a familiar face in my life. I eagerly went to the bars of the cell to speak with him, and inquiring about Cynthia, but Richard tried to calm me with his graceful demeanor. "Everything will be alright," he kept saying. "I have taken care of this. Your bail money has been processed."

I gasped in shock. "You paid my bail money?"

"Oh, it was nothing. They demanded two million dollars, because the accusation is a child abuse case, but my private lawyer was able to bring it down a little. But I was prepared to do anything for you, as you undoubtedly know that."

I looked in awe at Richard, not being able to come up with the proper words of gratitude. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Simple," Richard smiled. "Just don't. There is no need for thanks between family members, right?"

My computer whiz friend came to visit me one afternoon. I could tell from his glittering eyes that he had discovered something of great importance.

"What is it?" I said without preamble.

"I found it!" Dustin announced happily.

I waited, hoping the hacker would elaborate but he stood there beaming.

"Found what, Dustin?" I said, a little impatiently.

"The Navigation-9 satellite prototype you had to steal from the Air Force base in Chicopee."

"Yes," I recalled aloud. "I had to give it up to Cynthia's kidnappers in order to secure her release. Isn't it gone? We lost the tracker."

"Uh, to be precise, Richard lost the tracker," Dustin corrected me. "Besides it was only the secondary one. I implanted a high frequency tracking device inside the satellite prototype."

"How? I was told the bad guys screened it prior to the exchange."

"I knew they would do that," the hacker continued excitedly. "So, I placed a timed passive tracker that activated only after seventy-two hours."

"That's possible?"

“*Da*, I’m that good.” Dustin beamed. He continued. “I’m guessing you want to know where the signal went off. I brought the coordinates with me right here.”

“Dustin, you are wonderful,” I said sincerely. “Show me the exact location. I’m going to retrieve it ASAP.”

Two hours later, I was on one of Dustin’s rented helicopters that did not have any ADS-B transponders installed, meaning the bird wouldn’t show on flight radars. I was headed to Terrebonne, an off-island suburb of Montreal. According to the tracker, the prototype was stationary inside an underground bomb-proof bunker. Heat signatures showed only two personnel were manning the site. I found it odd that there would be only two men guarding such a valuable object. I located the bunker with little difficulty and breached the perimeter without raising alarm. Before entering the bunker, I used a non-lethal DOD approved incapacitating agent to knock out anyone who may have been inside. I entered, unobstructed, but it was not the prototype of the satellite that first appeared before me. The fire-proof storage room was stacked with hundreds of paintings and rare artifacts!

I recognized many of them. During the first few years I had worked under Richard’s guidance, he sent me on numerous missions with the task of retrieving rare manuscripts, paintings or art crafts from black market dealers. Richard assured me the missions were sanctioned by the US government and the objective was to prevent war criminals and gang leaders from profiting from the sales of those items. I was prepared to risk my life and secure those items for Richard. I was certain he forwarded the items to NSA safehouses or to the care of the secretary of the Defense Department. Little did I know that Richard had been using me to increase his personal wealth. He tasked me with missions, claiming it was for the benefit of the United States, when he was pocketing all the items for himself.

I thought this discovery was shocking enough until I opened the large metallic box in the center of the temperature-controlled room. The prototype of the Air Force satellite! It was lying in the bunker, wrapped in pristine aluminum. Slowly, the realization sunk in. I finally understood what had transpired three days earlier.

Cynthia’s so-called abduction.

The kidnapper’s bizarre demand.

And Richard’s offbeat reaction to the incident.

It began to make sense. I never imagined him capable of using his own daughter to profit in his collections but he was successful in deceiving me and convincing me that my beloved Cynthia’s life was in danger. He knew I would have gone to the ends of earth to save her and would have managed to steal any object if it meant securing her safe release so he used my weakness by staging a false kidnapping. I should have known at the very moment of exchange, when he volunteered to make the trade with the kidnappers. I had told him exactly where the tracker was- except I did not know that my hacker friend had placed a secondary device into the prototype.

Without waiting any longer, I called Dustin and asked him to contact the FBI field office in Ottawa and have them send the bureau’s SWAT team to this bunker. Before returning home, I left a detailed email addressed to the Acting Director of the FBI and the Justice Department’s inspector general, explaining what these items were and that it rightfully belonged to the United States government.

When I found out that Cynthia was not in fact abducted, rather Richard had orchestrated the whole incident to use my emotions and coax me into committing yet another act of theft for him, I finally realized that Richard was obsessed with his step daughter. He loved Cynthia almost like a lover- not like a father, and he destroyed any man who dared to come near her. Not only did he murder Cynthia’s ailing biological father, he was also responsible for her husband, Noah’s death as well as her mother’s imprisonment.

I loved Cynthia and wanted to save the girl from her domineering stepfather. But he refused to let her go without a fight and became insane with anger and jealousy. Richard targeted all his attacks on me. It was hardly a fair fight. He was smart, powerful, had connections with senators and sitting presidents, while I was a penniless, powerless ex criminal who was so much younger than him. I had no political connections, but I was not afraid of him. The more he wanted to have Cynthia all to himself, the more stubborn I became.

I don’t know if it was foolish of me. Richard swore to become my blood enemy and swore to destroy all that I loved. He began to target the people I loved, the way I took his princess step-daughter away from him.

His first move against me was trying to frame me for crimes I never did. Richard knew about my past activities, including how I had managed to elude the KGB colonel’s scrutiny and siphoned off millions of rubles to offshore accounts. I had shared all the details of my missions with Cynthia’s father. At that time of my life, he had been the only person who believed my story. He acknowledged the existence of the Camp rather than calling me a deluded Russian fool.

As the director of the NSA’s black ops program, Richard used his unique position to ensure I had a cover story for all of the operations I sabotaged while acting as a double agent. However, all of those joint operations now became my vulnerability. Richard knew too much about me. My strengths, my weaknesses. He used the knowledge of my finances to black mail me and had the State

Department issue a warrant for my arrest. I panicked; it was not easy to live the life of a fugitive. Dustin tried his best to cover up my trail but there were paper records that couldn't be erased very easily. Even the best hacker in Russia couldn't save me from going to jail.

I believed in setting a set of rules for myself and hold myself accountable to those rules. Black mail, kidnapping, murder or extortion were not my favorite pastime. I tried to avoid them at any cost. But Richard's relentless pursuit of my past crimes and his determination to make me suffer led me to act drastically. I contacted several wealthy bankers and entrepreneurs who I knew had skeletons in their closets. I uncovered some of their shady dealings and threatened to expose them unless they agreed to testify to the Treasury and State departments that the money I had wired in to the United States actually had belonged to them. On one occasion, the owner of a car manufacturing company refused to oblige to my request. I threatened to kidnap his children if he didn't agree to testify on my behalf. The plan worked and the case against me was dropped. The judge withdrew the warrant for my arrest. I was once more free from the threat of imprisonment.

Richard thought his plan of ruining my life was impeccable. But then he lost again. Just when I hoped he would get off my back, Richard upped his game and framed me for one murder after the other, and I unframed myself one case at a time, handing the real culprit to the authorities, until he became hopeless.

A war with me was becoming a losing game. When the old man almost lost all hope of defeating me, he found his jackpot. In one of his raids to my apartment, he seized a handful of surveillance images I had saved in my safe box. It was of the Russian woman who I had seen many years ago. I sometimes used to go to her house and watch her children play in the front yard. They were almost siblings to me. The last time I saw them was eight months earlier, when she was hospitalized to deliver her sixth child. I had almost considered her to be like a mother to me, so the idea of losing her frightened me. I spent the night outside the hospital, hoping her five older children would not become orphans. I paid a doctor ten thousand dollars in cash so he would personally offer the best medical attention. After what seemed like an eternity, the doctor I hired informed me that a beautiful healthy baby boy was born. I was pleased. He gave me complimentary pictures and foot print of the child. I was content that the Russian woman was safe. My second mother was safe among her children and spouse. Relieved, I flew abroad to conduct my next mission.

Richard did not cease sending hitmen after me. I was not mad at the men Richard had hired to kill me. I knew they may have been coerced into agreeing to take up this assassination job. It was possible that they had come from underprivileged backgrounds, grew up in broken homes or were deluged in poverty or debts. I knew they must have needed money desperately in order to agree to kill a fellow human being who never wronged or harmed them. Richard placed before them a lucrative offer- millions of dollars in untraceable whitened money would be theirs if they could successfully execute me.

My years of training at the Soviet spy Camp equipped me with enough skills to survive in the most adverse environments. I was taught to detect whether I someone was following me. My instincts gave a shout if I was being stalked by even the most elusive party. Those who were out to hunt and kill me had a trying task. They wanted to end my life quickly and efficiently but could not do so. Those hitmen failed on successive missions because I would always manage to evade them. But their resilience astonished me. No matter how many assassination attempts I managed to avoid, the killers kept coming. I recall visiting a local thrift shop in Manhattan when the cashier offered to check out my items for me. I opened my mouth to thank him when I noticed the barrel of a shot gun aimed at me from beneath the counter. I couldn't think of anything to say.

Why would this decent man who had been selling items to me for months suddenly decide to shoot me? I asked him what was going on and why he was aiming a lethal weapon at me. He replied that it was unfortunate that a good customer like myself had to die but ten million dollars was a lot of money and he would get it if he delivered my body to his employer. I begged him to let me go, and told him that the person who hired him would not honor the deal. I was not lying, because in the many years that I had worked in Richard's black ops unit at the NSA, I never saw him pay any of his freelancers cash or electronic money. He didn't believe in the policy of arming or strengthening his enemies and most often, would eliminate the mercenaries once the job was completed.

The cashier repeated that he had no scruples killing me for that amount of money. I pleaded with him that money was unimportant, especially if did not live to enjoy it, but the man shook his head and fired. I sensed that his finger was squeezing in on the trigger so I dashed for the door. Clearly, I wasn't fast enough and the bullet grazed the top of my left shoulder, causing a gaping hole on my jacket. Blood was dripping from arm as I ran for my life. The assassin was in pursuit but I hid inside a public recycling container until he passed.

The cashier's zeal to kill me made wonder what could drive seemingly decent men to become killers. I suspected that Richard must have told them terrible things about me. Those men who were eager to kill me probably believed I was a monster. I myself once saw a portfolio Richard made in which he implicated me on more than a dozen murders that he had committed. It was when I had begun to

date Cynthia. Richard disapproved of my relationship with his stepdaughter from day one and did everything in his power to draw wedge between us.

Now, the assassins were also taught that I was the worst man alive. If I knew anything about Richard, I had no doubt he gave each of hired killers a detailed file of all the alleged crimes including killings and bombings supposedly done by me.

Whenever a hitman cornered me or tried to kill me, I would do my best to leave the vicinity immediately. Engaging in gunfights with them did not appeal to me because I did not blame them or hate them for what they were doing to me. I did not try to kill them back. I never even bothered to have them arrested because it was not their fault that they were chosen to become killers.

Richard was an old man who had been hurt and felt betrayed because I continued a love affair with his stepdaughter despite his disapproval. Now he wanted me to disappear from the face of earth and hired hundreds of assassins to kill me. I could not justify his actions but I did understand where he came from. As for the unfortunate hired hitmen, I hoped they abandoned their miserable job and left me alone. But it never happened. No matter where I hid, somehow, the mercenaries always found me. I was not too shocked. They had the technology of AI at their disposal and Richard must have allowed them access to NSA servers in order to track my movements.

In due time, I began to identify the trigger points. Every time I contacted Cynthia in any way, whether by phone, secure messaging apps or encrypted emails, I noticed my location would become compromised. It happened numerous times until I began to suspect that my communication system was being monitored by Richard and his team.

I understood that Richard must have kept Cynthia's phone and messages under surveillance but I could not help but contact her from time to time. I could not bear to go too long without hearing her voice or talking to her. Each time I sought to meet her in person, my life would come under attack soon after we parted or if Cynthia went away even for a few minutes. I eventually realized that Richard most probably had Cynthia followed and whenever I gave her my location in order to meet her, he would send his hitmen after me. They would find my location by following her but since the assassins were working under Richard's employment, they had orders not to hurt his stepdaughter. As long as Cynthia was standing or sitting near me, the killers would remain at bay but as soon as they found me alone, the cavalry would move in to ambush me. I survived by sheer miracle so many times but there were many near misses. I loved Cynthia dearly but it was also getting highly dangerous to meet her in person. Every time, Richard would either track Cynthia's phone, follow her or even manipulate her into giving up my location. My comrades advised me to temporarily cease meeting Cynthia until we found out how Richard was using her to track me. Regrettably, I disconnected with her for a short while.

The attempts on my life halted temporarily but I began to receive tips and intel from anonymous sources which suggested that there were impending attacks planned on various city centers in North America and Europe. A known associate in the British Defense Intelligence informed me that a radioactive weapon was set to detonate in Leicester Square. The perpetrators were believed to belong to an Eastern European mercenary group but the location of the explosive device was unknown. I was horrified to hear this because I knew that it was an essential tourist site and one of the most visited places in the world. If the bomb went off, the effects would be catastrophic. At the behest of my British friend, I flew to London, hoping to find the precise location of the explosives and deactivate the device before anyone got hurt.

At my insistence, the Square was cleared and accompanied by bomb disposal engineers, I was able to narrow the location of the bomb to an intersection near Cranbourne street. The bomb was embedded under a concrete slab, only yards away from the side entrance of the Wyndham's Theatre. It was fitted to timer and from the outer copper layer, I could tell that the slightest alteration or tampering would cause the device to detonate. I connected with the deputy director of Defense Intelligence on a direct line and apprised him of the situation. He warned me against attempting to defuse it on my own and ordered me to wait for the bomb squad to reach my location, but I disregarded his advice and proceeded to disarm the bomb.

I crouched to peer under the cement slab when a bullet whizzed past my forehead, knocking the safety helmet off my head. I looked at the clean shot. It was from a sniper's rifle! Someone was trying to cut me down. And he or she waited until I was at this location, disarming the bomb. After a moment, it hit me. I was not an accidental side victim. The sniper must have been waiting for me to arrive in this Square all this time, and had conveniently placed a bomb in such a place that would ensure he got a clear shot. If I hadn't bent down to check the bomb's core, the bullet would have straight through my skull. The assassins knew I would not be able to resist coming here and personally try to deactivate the explosive device. Leicester Square was the ideal choice. Richard taught the killers well. He must have told them that I could not bear to see civilians get killed and would have done anything to prevent the bombs from going off. I unwittingly presented myself as an easy target for those snipers who were hiding inside nearby towers and buildings, waiting for the right moment to mow me down.

The second time I received an alert about a nuclear device being rigged to explode, I knew that it was likely a hoax. I was almost certain that the assassins who were still trying to kill me were planning to fish me out by planting false information. But when I heard of the location of the bomb, my blood ran cold. The nuclear bomb was inside Serbia's Church of Saint Sava, which was one of the largest

Orthodox churches in the world. Thousands of people visited the place and I never heard of anyone who went to Belgrade and was not captivated by the exquisiteness of the structure.

In order to throw the assassins off my track, I decided to fly coach to Niš Constantine the Great Airport in Belgrade, and travelling under a pseudonym, I went to the Orthodox church that sat on the eastern part of the Svetosavski Trg square and began to search for the bomb. While scouring the interior hall, I was struck by the sheer magnificence of the ancient house of worship. There was no sign of a bomb. Just when I was about to give up my search, I felt warmth in my feet. I asked a priest why the ground was so warm and he commented that this Church had underfloor heating system that ran a meter below the marbled hall. This information clicked in my brain and I ran to the sublevel heating room and within minutes, was able to locate the round beeping device. It was barely above the size of a football but the bomb was armed. I took out my phone and dialed the number of the CIA's Clandestine Services office in Belgrade. The line did not go through because I was several meters below ground level. I backed away from the pulsating device and ran up the narrow stairs in order to get a clear signal. As I was making my way up the stairs, the round device exploded, scattering hot shards and splinters all over the basement floor. I fell on my back and suffered mild concussions but was fortunately far enough to avoid any lasting damage.

This near miss was exhausting. I knew someone had targeted me again by setting a trap inside a crowded location so that I would show up and present myself to be sacrificed. The snipers and assassins Richard hired figured out how my mind worked and they used my weakness to find and kill me.

Like a mouse who can never resist the cheese, I always fell into those traps, even though my instinct told me that those attacks were most likely a setup. Despite that, I couldn't help myself because even if there was a remote chance that the bombs were actually rigged to explode, I knew many innocent people would die, and I could never let that happen. I couldn't bear to sit by and watch civilians suffer.

Each time I approached the bomb location in order to deactivate the device, I would get ambushed from all sides. Snipers would pre-position themselves on the rooftops of nearby buildings, training their high-powered rifles at me, waiting for me to come in the open and expose myself to their line of fire.

The bomb that was carefully placed in the center of Times Square was yet another false alarm but it was different from the London attacks. There was a secondary bomb near the main device and when I successfully removed the trigger chip from the first bomb, a man ran towards me, shouting at me to get away from the bomb. I thought he was a frightened civilian so I tried to pull him out of harm's way but he held on to me, pinning me against a lamp post, then abruptly flung me towards a wooden bench. The secondary bomb planted there detonated instantly, sending debris flying towards me, blinding me with dust and smoke.

That was a painful episode, both physically and psychologically. I was two seconds away from sacrificing my life for someone who was trying to kill me. The irony of my life astounded me but I knew I had to maintain my standards regardless of how eager those men were to take my life.

I didn't know why they wanted me dead so desperately. I didn't know these men, never hurt them or jeopardized their safety in any way. Perhaps, Richard told them awful things about me...Can money really make people so bad? I thought people are driven to kill for some righteous cause. I never felt anger towards those men who tried to kill me. I only felt pity.

Money could indeed become a dangerous incentive if someone believed that this earth was their permanent abode. The world and its wealth could spurn one into carrying out unforgivable acts because people attached value to it. Money was merely a cheap paper and gold was only an ordinary metal- yet, it was for these meagerly provisions that freelance mercenaries were willing to kill one another, severe blood relationship, nourish jealousy and grudge against partners and neighbors and destroy their own future in the process.

March 1, 1996

Could you have more than one home? Or any at all? I thought it was impossible to love two places at once, but home for me was where I was loved. Cynthia was my home. In my childhood, my dear mother was my home. When mother passed away- leaving me alone in this world- a frightened child who would become a castaway and left to languish in juvenile centers and adult prisons, I felt a part of my heart crumbling to pieces. As an adult, I was sent to America by my Soviet and East German employers and although the new country was reprehensibly alien to me, I found home yet again in the arms of my beloved Cynthia, the gorgeous CIA officer who happened to be the daughter of my American benefactor. For the first time since my mother died, I was ecstatic to have found a permanent abode, a place where I would be welcomed and cherished. Cynthia and I loved each other. We were inseparable. There was no one in this world I loved or trusted more than her.

Cynthia's father was not entirely happy with my relationship with his daughter. He felt that I was not qualified to be his son-in-law due to my tempest-filled past. It was true that I could not offer Cynthia the comfort and luxury she deserved but I gave her my heart. She filled every aorta of my heart and every cell in my brain. During a small Thanksgiving party, Cynthia invited me to her father's place to join her in the traditional celebrations. I felt honored to be treated like a member of her family but her father, Richard, looked cross when I showed up. I studied his face which had become dark with anger. He asked me coldly what I was doing at their family event and before I could reply, fortunately Cynthia came to my side and pleaded with her father to allow me to stay. I was beyond grateful to be able to get involved a little more with Cynthia.

That evening, Cynthia's father invited a three-men band to sing for us. The music was so melodious and emotional that I felt the love for Cynthia swelling in my heart. I was so in love with her and wanted to dance to the soft music. I searched for her and found her sitting at a side table with her father. Richard seemed to be as affected as I was and with closed eyes, he and Cynthia were swaying with the music beats. I approached her side of the table and cleared my throat. Cynthia opened her eyes and smiled. It was the most beautiful smile I've seen in years. I begged her to dance with me and she looked searchingly at her father.

Richard noticed my presence and leapt to his feet in rage. "Don't try to take my daughter away from me, young man," he snapped. Then leaning down, he lifted Cynthia to her feet. "My daughter will be dancing with me tonight."

And so, I spent the next five hours watching Cynthia and her father dance the night away. Twice, I gathered enough courage to ask her to dance with me, but Richard stubbornly refused to let her go. The next morning, I walked into Cynthia when she was slicing fruits in the kitchen. I was still upset over the night before and wanted her to know how I felt.

"Your father doesn't even allow me to talk to you," I complained bitterly. "I love you so much but he didn't let me dance with you not even once. That is so unfair."

Cynthia smiled at me and lowered her voice. "Look, my father is only trying to protect me, John. Please don't be angry with him."

"How can I not be angry, Cynthia? We have been dating for years now. He shouldn't try to act like I am a stranger!"

"He loves me a lot," Cynthia said tearfully, walking roughly past me. "It's not a bad thing. I know you wanted to dance with me last night, but I had to stay with him. He is my father, after all."

I shook my head, frustrated. "Fine, I'm going to my apartment."

"When will you be back here?"

"I don't know," I replied angrily. "Don't bother calling. I'll probably be at work all day."

After this heated exchange, I returned to my apartment and tried to calm my nerves. It made me sad to see the only woman I loved not fighting hard enough for me. I knew Richard was a possessive man but he must understand that his daughter cannot possibly live with him forever.

I was drowning myself in misery when a sharp knock in the door broke my reverie. I was not expecting any visitor so I peered carefully through the crack of the door. A woman in torn clothes and disheveled hair was standing at my doorstep. I opened the door and the young woman collapsed in my arms. I was surprised to see this stranger but she looked injured so I carried her to my living room and poured water over her cracked lips. She seemed to come her senses instantly, becoming alert and clutching my arm. She begged me to help her and save her from her abusive husband who was chasing her. I noticed her features for the first time and saw a striking familiarity.

"Fiona?" I said haltingly, not really believing she was Fiona Young, the wife of my colleague at the NSA. I remembered her face because she would sometimes come to pick up Tony from the office. What was my friend's wife doing in my apartment?

Fiona hurriedly poured forth torrents of explanation and claimed that her husband had become violent towards her lately. She had no one to turn to and thought I might be able to protect her from Tony. Although I found it difficult to believe Tony was capable of hurting women, I promised to keep Fiona safe and assured her she was welcome to spend the night in my apartment. Maybe she was genuinely a victim of domestic violence. My late mother's memories returned and I recalled how she had been viciously abused and beaten by my father. I was so young. I couldn't help her then, but now I would help other women who were suffering from that fate. That night, I relinquished my bedroom to the young woman and slept in the couch.

My eyes flew open sometime past midnight. My house guest was kneeling over. I could feel Fiona's hair brushing my face. I tried to sit up but she gently pushed me back and said she was afraid of being alone and wanted to lie down with me. I thought the request was strange but did not want to argue with her. A few minutes later, I was overwhelmed by my fatigue and fell asleep. The next morning, Fiona was still sleeping on the couch when I prepared to leave for work. I had planned to arrive at the office early to speak with Tony and

broach the subject of his wife as calmly as possible. I woke Fiona gently and offered her breakfast but she declined. I promised to return with some fast food and partake lunch with her. There were questions in my mind that I was still confused about.

I arrived at my work place in the suburbs of Junction City. The off-site location was situated mere miles from Fort Haley, an Army installation located in North Central Kansas. Tony was not in yet but the office was crowded with uniformed and plainclothes men. I noticed the insignia of their uniform: county police.

As soon as the law enforcement officials saw me, they drew their weapons and ordered me to the ground. Within minutes, I was arrested and booked in the county jail. It was not until the next day that I was able to learn the reason for my arrest. The police charged me with the murder of Fiona Young, my colleague Tony's wife. To say I was shocked would be understatement because I was not being able to comprehend a single word that the sheriff said to me. My mind was swimming in uncertainty and fear. Fiona Young couldn't be dead. She was perfectly well when I had left her in the morning. How could she die one hour after I left the apartment? But the police had no doubt about my guilt. My friend's wife was in my apartment and had died under mysterious circumstances. I did not blame them for being suspicious.

I was granted the option to make a single phone call. I dialed Cynthia's number and waited. She did not reply so I left a voice message, explaining what had happened and how sorry I was for hurting her. I don't know whether she received the voicemail or not but she did come to visit me while I was in the penitentiary. It was a tearful reunion and I pleaded with Cynthia to believe in my innocence. It seemed that my fellow workers at the NSA believed I was guilty and Tony Young, the husband of the deceased was beside himself with grief. The judge ruled out bail and my speedy trial began the next month.

Life in the correctional facility was becoming more and more intense as my case progressed. The guards were becoming more and more aggressive each passing day. Some spread rumors about the prisoners that I was a wife slayer. Local news quoted the mayor as saying that I was having an affair with a colleague's wife and had killed her in cold blood to hide evidence of the affair.

The trial lasted less than week. I was surprised to find so many people coming up to the witness stand claiming they had seen me exit the apartment moments before Fiona was killed. The forensic specialists took the stand and described the death in details. This was the first time I learned of how the poor woman died. Her throat had been slit. The murder weapon was one of the knives in my kitchen. My heart sank when I heard that: it meant the murder weapon must have been covered with my prints. I could not blame the police for believing in my guilt.

People I've never seen in the neighborhood before showed up in court and testified under oath that they had seen me with the murder weapon. I had no idea why they were fabricating such blatant lies. Others gave bizarrely false testimony such as seeing me arguing or fighting with Fiona Young on the day of her death. I knew I was being set up for the murder but there was nothing I could do. The state appointed public defender cared little whether I was guilty or not. He blindly believed in the false testimonies as well. For the first few days, I listened raptly, eager to discover who the real culprit was. The poor woman had died in my apartment and I didn't even know who her killer was. I still wondered what the true reason was for Fiona to arrive at my apartment that fateful night. Was she sent by someone? Why did she claim to have been abused and beaten by her husband? My heart pained for Tony, the diligent colleague who thought I had betrayed him and killed his wife. He would never find out who had stolen his beloved wife from him.

The jury was faced with an overwhelming evidence of my guilt and delivered their guilty verdict. Two days later, the judge declared his judgement and imposed the death penalty. I realized at that moment that I was unfortunate to have my trial at a State which still enacted the death penalty. It was too late now- I was scheduled to die in sixty days.

Every day, I woke up in my cell, trying to brave the tormenting emptiness inside my heart. I was hopeless, homesick and heartbroken. Yet, what more could I expect from my life? I was nothing; an orphan who never made any significant contribution to the world. I had no lineage, no honor, no legacy. When I ran away from the Siberian orphanage, I was living in the streets like urchins, begging and stealing my daily bread.

I had been a common thief.

And when I had thought nothing could be worse for me, I ended up in a secret Soviet prison where I was wrongfully sentenced to death. At that time, I had wept, begging the guards to spare my life. I had believed I deserved to live and become older and travel the rich Russian lands. But somehow, I survived the execution and was recruited to work in a clandestine training Camp, where I was taught to be a spy, but essentially, my job was to be the perfect assassin.

When I finally came to the United States, I was grateful to be able to start a new life. I didn't think I deserved a second chance. After all, I was a thief and a killer. There was nothing noble in me. The world owed me nothing, yet I persevered and came this far. This time, however, when the American courts sentenced me to death, I did not protest. This had been long overdue.

Maybe I deserved to die like a vagrant, alone- unloved and unlamented.

In my prison, the mornings were not cheerful. They brought no glad tidings to me. I spent my mornings gazing at the hanging calendar in my cell, checking the day. I would scan the date over and over in my head.

Today was April 12, 1996. I had forty-six days to live.

Cynthia sent me another letter. This was as sweet as the last one. She mentioned that her daughters keep her busy. The twins went to a private elementary school and had to be helped with their homework. I must have re-read the letter thousands of times and because every word became etched in my memory.

Cynthia had sent me another photo of herself. For hours, I would gaze at her soft face which looked freckled by the sun, and the round brown eyes, which sparkled with life. Her hopeful countenance kept me sane. Out of twenty-four hours in my cell, I spent over twenty-three hours thinking about Cynthia. Her letters were the only shards of hope in that cold cell. I wrote back as often as I could but the guards in the death row unit were agonizingly brutal towards me. They doubtlessly believed I was guilty but it seemed that my Russian surname contributed to their distrust of me.

The prison guards treated me as though I was wild and dangerous. I had been perplexed by their hostility but overheard them speaking one morning about being on front line duty in 'Nam. These guards were military veterans and had fought in America's war in Vietnam. It was not a wonder that they hated me for being Russian for they have undoubtedly led to believe that all Russians are communists.

Their antagonistic behavior made mundane activities increasingly difficult in the prison. During mealtimes, the guards would intentionally drop my food tray to the ground so that I would have to pick the pieces of bread off the grimy floor and eat it. Other times, they would come up with excuses to deny me visitation rights. I tolerated the separation from Cynthia by listening to her tapes, in which she would record ten or twenty minutes of conversation and mail those cassette tapes to me. I used the prison issued portable cassette player to listen to Cynthia's tranquil voice and kind words. It gave me some ray of hope in the dark cell.

Life in an American prison was terrible. But I could tolerate the squalid condition there, but it was more and more painful to bear the harsh treatment of my American guards. The prison warden and his officers were constantly cursing me. They knew I was Russian and they wished me painful death every time they saw me.

When I was suffering in prison, I had this back flash from my memory. I remembered the time when I was in the Siberian orphanage, and my age was barely fifteen years.

I used to get up early and take stroll out on the peaceful roads.

I remember one morning I had gotten up early and the summer sun was rising brightly and broadly all over the area. I walked outside and basked in its gentle warmth. And the warm sunlight spread all over the snow-peaked cliff. I stood in the sun. And I had so much hope that day. I felt so much happiness. I was full of freedom and hope. I was so happy with my life that morning. Did I know that it was one of the last days of my life as a free boy? That I would probably never live another day as a normal person, as a human being, without killing someone, and spying on someone or being tortured?

What a time for that memory to come to me! These thoughts made me doubly sad and miserable. Suddenly, I felt like crying out loud.

I didn't want to die here. I wanted to die in Russia. I wanted to be buried next to my mother; not in America, as a traitor, in a land that saw me as an enemy. These painful thoughts made me nearly crazy.

Some days, I would be seized by misery. Other days, I would sit impassively, without hope and belief, knowing that the future had nothing left for me. Every day I counted the days and hours that I had left in my life. Cynthia was permitted to visit me once every other week, but that too ceased. I had written a long letter to Cynthia and requested the guard to mail it. What I received in response shocked me beyond comprehension. Cynthia wrote a short note, cursing me bitterly for speaking about her in such derogatory terms. I had no idea what she was referring to- until the guard who was supposed to deliver and mail my letter was passing by the cell gates and laughed openly at my misery.

I begged him for an explanation and he at last admitted to switching my last letter another inmate's letter. That inmate had apparently written a very hate-filled passage to his girlfriend but the guard mailed it to Cynthia, making it seem as though I had written it. I was so angry and helpless that I cried the entire day. Cynthia stopped visiting me after that incident. I knew writing to her would be more than useless because the guards would simply switch my letters and make my relationship with Cynthia more sour. In this dark

prison, what I missed most was Cynthia's warm hug every morning and her kisses. I knew even if nothing else survived, my love for her would remain unbreakable. Death could not part us. I was too devoted to her.

I grew despondent and requested the guards to give me more reading material. They snubbed my requests but then I noticed a Black American guard walking with a fairly new paperback. I asked him what it was and to my surprise, he said he wrote that novel himself. Impressed, I asked if I could read it and he happily obliged and lent it to me. The new reading material gave me a small glimmer of hope in the gloomy cell.

I was told that I had a visitor. Two men wished to see me. The guards said they claimed to be my brothers.

When the men walked in, I recognized them instantly. "Vaska!" I beamed from behind the thick glass. My old friend returned my greetings and handed the phone receiver to the second man.

"Igor?" I asked, tentatively, not being able to believe that the chief inspector of the Inspectorial Directorate of FSK would come to see me in person.

Igor nodded and spoke into the receiver. "We have heard about the sentencing." The silver-bearded man stared at me fixedly. "Is there anything we can do to halt the execution?"

Various emotions were coursing through my heart. These were old friends I hadn't spoken to in years. I remembered Vasily. He was my mission partner at the Colonel's Camp and was marked for cancellation. When I learned he was to be executed, I destroyed half the facility in order to break him out. After hiding him in Kazan for twelve weeks, I arranged for him to escape to Ust-Kamenogorsk, an administrative district of East Kazakhstan.

Igor Viktorovich Korabelnikov was one of the senior chiefs of GRU when he became the target of an international death squad. I was already working to dismantle the Camp at that time and decided to save his life.

It was in one of the most secure neighborhoods in East Berlin. The Colonel and his Stasi colleagues were holding a private meeting nearby when Igor overheard their conversation. The former colonel of the KGB was *resident* and bureau chief in East Berlin, and had built robust relationship with numerous Stasi agents ever since he was stationed at Dresden as a young KGB officer in 1971. However, the visiting GRU officer inadvertently heard far more than he was granted clearance for and was shocked to learn that the Colonel had planned to use the headquarter building of the East German Stasi secret service to realize his goal to eventually reach world domination through an iron-fist control over organized crime and the trade of intelligence. Before Igor Korabelnikov was able to relay this information to his superiors at the GRU, the Stasi death squad decided unanimously to cancel him and staged an elaborate plan to liquidate him and his family.

I remember the incident well; the senior GRU chief's entire family was trapped inside a vehicle that was rigged with explosives and I was able to deactivate the trigger and rescue them. After that event, Igor promised me he would return the favor one day.

But it was nearly eight years ago. How did they find out about me? I felt fresh burgeoning grief filling my chest. Would I die and disappear from this world, without being able to bid my esteemed comrades an honorable farewell, without visiting the homeland of my mother, without saying goodbye to her one last time?

Vasily was speaking into the phone's receiver. "I called Igor Korabelnikov as soon as I heard about your situation. He used his connections to get us into the prison log. Tell us- what can we do from here? Igor leaves for Moscow this afternoon."

I glanced at the man who swore to give his life for me, but there was nothing they could do. My sentence was final.

Gripping the phone with both hands, I tried to speak calmly. "Thanks, Vaska. You were a great friend. I made peace with my fate. There is nothing the you can do that will change the judge's mind, but there is something you can do for me."

"Anything!" Igor announced.

"My mother, her family- they are going to be unprotected. I am worried about their safety. Just try to make sure they are taken care of."

"I will look after them as my own," Igor vowed.

Vasily nodded. "Write down your family's address. I will find them- keep them under special guards."

I quickly scribbled the New Jersey home address and slid the paper to my Russian friends.

Vasily studied the paper. "Your mother lives there?"

From his confused looks, I knew what he was thinking.

Vasily knew my mother had passed away when I was a little boy.

I quickly explained. "When I arrived in the United States, I was alone and there was a Russian woman who lived with her husband and several adopted children; she lived near my apartment. I felt nostalgic when I saw her. It reminded me of home, as though I suddenly had a second mother." I looked at my friend. "She looked nearly identical to my own mother, Vaska. I began to consider them as my own family."

Before I finished my statement, both Vasily and Igor promised to look after my family and took their leave. I broke down in long sobs moments after they exited the visiting booth. I could feel tears wet the stubble on my cheeks as the guards escorted me back to my narrow cell. The tears wouldn't stop- I almost tasted the coppery salt in my mouth. The visit from familiar faces from Russia rekindled emotions I had shut in my heart long ago. Now, I was afraid to think that death was so near and I was so far away from my native land. It was frightening to imagine I would be buried by strangers, thousands of miles away from home, forever apart from my family.

As the days progressed, my date of execution was nearing fast. In desperation, I began to reach out to the few colleagues I trusted. None of them knew I was marked for death. I wrote numerous letters to the CIA and NSA operatives who had participated in missions with me but I never received any reply. I realized weeks later why this was so- the guards were refusing to mail my letters; none of the intended recipients ever got my beseeching messages. One afternoon, during guards' inspection, the African-American guard was making rounds in the cell unit. I was sitting in the cell, weeping, when his heavy footstep halted beside the metal bars.

The guard must have noticed my misery and inquired why I had no visitors or loved ones coming to see me. With resignation, I told him about what had happened to my letters. None of my friends received the messages I had written to them. The guard was sympathetic and offered to help. He had been less hostile towards me than the other guards and even allowed me to read his book, so I decided to ask him for help. I handed him two handwritten letters and begged him to mail it to a friend who worked at the Agency.

Incredibly, he agreed.

I waited in anticipation for the next week, hoping against hope that my letter would reach the comrades who had the power to help me. My prayers were answered. Five days later, I received my first outside visitor. It was Sam Clark, the dear colleague who had participated in various missions alongside myself for the past five years. I was relieved to see a friendly face after waiting woefully in the death row. Sam was shocked to hear the details of my case and declared instantly that it was grossly unfair for the court to hand me a death sentence over a crime I did not commit. He hired four independent lawyers and summoned my colleagues at the NSA as witnesses. My new lawyers were able to bring in numerous eyewitnesses who saw me leaving the apartment long before the woman was killed. I had a solid alibi. After studying the new evidence, the court agreed that there was a mistrial and dismissed the charges against me.

Meanwhile, Sam continued to investigate the murder of Fiona. Her husband Tony was finally convinced I was innocent and began assisting Sam in finding out who his wife's real killer was. It would be many months later that I would find out the truth behind that night's incident in my apartment. I discovered the mistreatment of the vast majority of the guards towards me was not accidental occurrences. They had been wired significant amounts of money to make my stay in prison as uncomfortable as possible. My lawyer conducted a separate investigation into their behavior and found out that the policemen had been instructed by their unknown benefactor to seize and destroy my letters. All my correspondence was filtered and the guards admitted to receiving instructions about my letters. Corruption in the prison had been almost contagious and several members of the jury as well as the witnesses who gave false testimony were later listed as missing because they were from other states and had been assuming false identity in order to show up in court and give unfair verdict and give false narrative under oath. The prison guards who were ordered to switch my letters to Cynthia admitted to receiving bribes from an unnamed man and had to appear in court for those misdemeanors. Two of them were suspended without pay and one received a minor sentence for abuse of detainee.

Being on the death row was a harrowing experience but I found some comfort in speaking with fellow inmates who had been condemned to die. Before entering the barbed-wire fenced facility, I had preconceived notions that those convicts would be society-hardened proto-radicals but not all of them were harsh or dangerous. Some were innocent like myself and had become the victims of flawed justice system. Nearly all the inmates were African-American and they responded positively to my existence. The prisoners had no issues with my Russianness. They did not treat me like an alien. I befriended two of my neighboring. We spoke through the cell bars and they described to me how their false conviction led to this damning fate.

While They Wept

I remembered verses of the sufferers,
And saw their tears in every line,
Over and over, I read their prayers,
And felt the pain as it were mine.

Their lives - hidden in a tomb,
Have no misery to conceal,

They feel no sorrow or gloom,
That unknown fate could reveal!

The cries of anguish can be heard,
But their crushed spirit will rise again,
And God once more shall keep His word,
And turn into pleasure their pain!

An elderly African-American fellow lived in the cell on my right. He had been on death row for three years and his date of execution was only a week away. The man was inconsolable and at times, got hysterical when detailing how his co-defendant framed him for the armed robbery and triple homicide. He had never touched the gun but his friend had left it in his house for the police to find. The court had no doubt about his guilt either and speedily handed out the death penalty. We talked about our shared fate. One day, I told him the partial truth- that is, I worked for the United States intelligence bureau. I promised to look into his case and attempt to prove his innocence if I ever got out of here.

This assurance granted him some relief. I was brainstorming ideas on how to have the elderly man exonerated when I heard the rattle of keys: the guards had turned up and were escorting my cell neighbor to a different unit.

"What is going on?" I demanded. When the guards didn't reply, I gripped the bars of my cell and repeated my question. "Where are you taking him?"

"Where else do you think, smartass?" One of the guards sneered. "This ain't a resort. Your pal is scheduled to die today."

"We are taking him to the chamber," the other guard said, a bit somberly.

His reply triggered a plethora of emotion from my African-American inmate friend. He began to shout in protest but the guards ignored him. They grabbed his arms and were dragging him through the narrow cell when he came directly across my cell. I was trying to squeeze my face between the bars in order to get a proper glimpse at him.

The death-row inmate saw me and burst into tears. "You promised you would save me, man," he pleaded with me.

I glanced at his dark lined face and peppery gray hair and couldn't think of what to say. "I'm sorry, man, I'm sorry," I kept repeating.

"You said you could prove my innocence," the man said again, this time clutching the bars of my cell.

"I know," I replied softly, trying not to choke out the words. "I believe you. I know you are innocent. And I swear, man, I swear if I was on the outside, I would have gotten the best lawyers and overturned your sentence."

The inmate squeezed his eyes shut, tears trickling down the corner of his face. "They are gonna kill me today, man. They are going to kill me and no one is gonna help me."

I knew giving him false hope would be unproductive so I gripped his fingers firmly, trying to instill strength to his pained heart. "You were a good friend," I said slowly.

The man shook his head. "You promised to help me, bro! You said you could stop them from killing me!"

I was trying to stay calm outside but my inside was burning with rage and anger and fury, and I felt so helpless. I couldn't believe he would die; when I promised him, I thought I really thought I would be able to save him. It was so hard for me to stop myself from screaming and cursing and crying. I forgot about my own fate. I held on to him tightly as if wishing for a miracle. Hoping for some help, not accepting fate, and cursing destiny while praying and desperately hoping for a last second one-time miracle.

"I won't forget you brother. And the whole world will know you were innocent."

My words seemed to calm him down slightly and despite the chains around his wrist, he clasped my hands.

One of the prison guards nudged him and ordered him to move. "Get going," he shouted.

My friend didn't let go of my hand and I too refused to back away from the cell gate. The guards became infuriated and used a metal baton to strike the inmate's arm. He yelled in pain and dropped his hands.

My head was swimming. I was so angry that I couldn't speak. I wanted to curse the guards and condemn them to utter disgrace but I was speechless in agony, anger and disbelief. My friend was being led to his execution and I could do nothing to stop it. I had inadvertently given him hope and now his life was about to end most unceremoniously. I felt so guilty and heartbroken. His feeble protests were echoing in my ears long after the guards had removed him from my unit. He died that evening.

Several executions took place in the three months I was in the death row cell. It dawned upon me that African-American inmates consisted of the vast majority in this prison. It was interesting to note that once sentenced to death, they were swiftly taken to be

executed. The injustice was agonizing. I had befriended several of my African-American cell mates and found them to be remarkably tolerant. They considered me to be a brother- their equal. And it was also refreshing not to be discriminated against for belonging to the great Russian land.

But I wish I could say the same about the guards. It became an open secret that I was Russian- but the guards belittled me relentlessly, often addressing me as a communist pig. But that pain was nothing compared to what I experienced on the side.

I was condemned to witness my cell neighbors die, one by one. The pain I felt in my heart each time an inmate was dragged to his death deluged my mind to such an extent that I would momentarily cease to remember that I too was scheduled to die within a month. To me, the world was empty.

Only Death was real. Life appeared to be so false and temporary. The reality of hopelessness and horror attacked from all sides.

The guards were cold and overbearing but I was not angry at them. I knew only cruel necessity made them into the people they are. They were guarding convicts- people who had supposedly committed unforgivable crimes.

When I was finally freed from jail, I went straight to Cynthia's house and hurried to explain my side of the story. I told her how the guards were vindictive towards me and switched the letters I wrote to her.

I purposefully neglected to mention to her that it was her father who had hired those guards to switch my letters and also ordered the guards to destroy all the letters I wrote to my lawyers and friends at the Agency. He had gone to great lengths to frame me for the murder of my colleague's wife but I felt that Cynthia did not need to hear how her father was trying to undermine my reputation.

I loved her and knew that she would confront her father about these allegation and Richard, being a mastermind of manipulation, would need only minutes to convince her that it was I who was fabricating lies about him. I did not need to blame her father, because Cynthia believed me when I said I never wrote those hateful words and rather, those were excerpt from the letters of other convicts who were venting anger towards their spouses.

The brief ordeal was finally over and I focused on reviving my relationship with her.

December, 1996

I don't know anything was wrong with my distant family until I received a phone call from a hospital. One of the doctors who I had paid generously for an unrelated incident contacted me to share a news. He informed me that the Russian woman who I was interested in keeping safe was hospitalized due to some kind of poisoning. The doctors were worried because the woman was pregnant with her seventh child. I wrote down the address of the hospital and rushed to the emergency unit. The Russian woman I met over a decade earlier in the streets of Manhattan when I was a frail teenager who had flown in directly from Moscow was almost dying. I ordered the doctors to conduct tests to determine the actual cause of her illness and also told them if they had to choose between saving her life versus the child's, they must save the woman.

On my way back from the emergency ward, I came across two heavy set men. Their long coats looked suspicious. Why would two men wear heavy coats in the summer? I bumped intentionally at one of them and felt a long barrel of a submachine gun inside. They were armed assassins! I grabbed one and tossed him over the stair railing while the other pummeled me with his fist. I ducked the blows and knocked him out with a backhand jab. I dragged the man out of the hospital and put him in my trunk. After driving off the road for several miles, I made sharp turns over a graveled road and finally opened the trunk to interrogate him. The killer was exhausted and was prepared to speak the truth.

The truth was harder for me to hear than for him to tell. I was dumbfounded to learn that Richard's men had hired the two hitmen to kill the Russian woman, the kind hearted mother of six children. Why would Richard ever do that? It made no sense. I could understand his wrath towards me but what did this innocent woman ever do to him? The answers lay in my apartment. He must have discovered the photo of the children I kept in my safe. The little boy, the Russian woman's youngest child, was adorable and looked like me in my baby picture when I was a baby so I had saved the pictures of the whole family for sentimental reasons. I had inwardly missed having a sound childhood. And in my mind they were my family. They all were my adopted siblings. And I wanted to share my happiness with them one day if I was ever to be safe once and for, all from all my enemies.

During late 1997, attacks on Russian energy sector intensified.

It was at this time that the first gas was delivered to Germany through the Belarus-Polish corridor and Kremlin was proud of the brand-new pipeline, but disaster struck in Siberia in the form of an explosion. No one suspected foul play at that time, and it was only after two years that I found out that it was actually Richard who was chiefly responsible for the bombarding of the Russia's largest gas field near Urengoykoye, in Siberia. After unauthorized drone registered to NSA servers dropped special bombs over the area, the place

burst into flames and all the pipes ruptured, sending plume of flames into the sky. The blaze that resulted from the attack was visible from miles away. I was worried about this situation because I knew that the Urengoykoye was one of the main sources of gas which flowed into Europe via the Yamal-Europe pipeline. Destruction of the supply line was bound to be detrimental, but neither my peers in Moscow nor my friends in the Pentagon could explain why someone would take an aggressive action like this.

The SVR conducted a separate investigation into where the American drone center may have come from. They had dispatched me to find out more details about the NSA connection, so I back-traced the shipment logs from Richard's office and found a specific coordinate to correspond with the drop point at Yekaterinburg. I was conducting my search as thoroughly as I could, but I could not locate the latest weapon cache that had been shipped in from the New York harbor. It was my second round in the shipping yard, and I again inspected the cargo in those shipping containers at the CIT terminal at the Yekaterinburg Customs Terminal. There was no sign of any C4 residue. I did not detect any obvious signs that they were transporting weapons. But I was certain if Richard had used his professional mercenaries to transport the weapon, then the containers with the explosives would be carefully sealed or camouflaged, so I resumed my painstaking search.

Soon after, the drone attack over the oil-supply line took place, and ironically, the remnants of the drones self-destructed over the target area and remnants were found lying in the debris. Special police seized the drone fragments and soon, issued warrant for my arrest. Moscow Municipal police also placed me on their most wanted list. Now fifty-thousand policemen were actively searching for me, believing I was the culprit. I spoke to a police officer who worked in the Petrovka Street office. He said my name was etched on the drones that were used to bomb the petrol stations, and it proved beyond any doubt, that I was the culprit. I tried to reason with him saying how was it possible that a trained agent like me would be foolish enough to carve my name on all the weapons and drones I used. It made no logical sense, but getting arrested was not an option for me. At least, not yet, because I needed to find out who really dropped those bombs. My answer was in the United States, where the drones originated from, so I began to think of ideas on how to go to America.

Travelling with an international arrest warrant out is very difficult. I was a fugitive now. Travelling via traditional route in via air or sea port was out of the question, so I decided to enter the United States via the Canadian border. But first, I had to escape into Alaska. It took me one week to get inside the Alaskan highlands. Twice, I lost my way, and began to trek in the wrong direction, but fortunately I met a man who belonged to a native tribe. He tried to point me to the right direction, but since he did not understand English, the man had no way of knowing where I was headed. I then realized that I understood the words he was saying, even though it was not English.

Although Russian was very much a minority language in Alaska, there was one dialect that was spoken in the Alaska Territory. During my training as a young operative, we were taught this dialect, but I had never practiced it with a native before. The dialect that had survived was called Ninilchik Russian and rather than die out, the language had been passed on from generation to generation in certain regions within Alaska. Ninilchik was older than the standard Russian I had learned so I had some trouble understanding it. The standard Russian had all three masculine, feminine, and neutral genders, while the Ninilchik Russian only had one and a half. Most nouns in this dialect were masculine except for biologically feminine nouns such as woman, daughter, or wife. Pronunciation was also significantly different, and it was obvious that many words had been borrowed from Native Alaskan languages.

With the help of this man, I was able to find my way to the Canadian border, and managed to slip into the United States via the forests bordering the Quebec and the U.S. state of Maine.

After arriving in America, I only made it to New Hampshire when several armed men in full-body bullet-resistant armor swooped on me and dragged me to an underground cell. They were American special forces and beat me brutally and called me a Russian terrorist. I was struck on the head so many times, that I ended up suffering from a concussion. During the interrogation, two of the men shouted angrily and told me to confess and admit to being a Russian agent and a murderer but I refused. His insults were mostly directed at my nationality, and I was not surprised to see his hatred, for I knew that Russophobia did not only affect Russian nationals, but it also impacted many people, across phenotypic features, religious symbols, skin tone, demographic categorization and country of birth who tried to survive in the fabric of the American society. Many people here suffered from anxieties about race, gender, and nationality. It was less obvious with Russophobia, making the very recognition of violence against Russians obscured through constant suspicion and hatred. The American man became so angry at my refusal to confess that he struck me repeatedly with the metal chair he was sitting on, and knocked me to the cement floor. I tried to rise but my coordination was very poor and their degrading manners made this doubly painful. The men who were torturing me rejoiced at my sorrow, mocking the madness of my lonely cries and the shrieking despair of my pain. I was drowning in the sounds of my own despair when I realized that I was physically in a very delicate shape. My right humerus had been shattered from his blows, and I looked in numb horror at the blood pumping out of my vein. The artery was probably ruptured but I felt only mild pain initially, but the sight of my bone sticking out from the massive wound from my upper arm terrified me. Then sharp bolts of excruciating pain flooded my upper body, and I then realized that it was the momentary trauma that had moments ago

made me oblivious to pain. The shock had worn off, as fresh bolts of pain began piercing my body. My mind rushed back to the time when I was in Russia and I secretly wished that I had been captured by fellow countrymen rather than these jovial and merciless Americans. I knew I was no longer in a perennially neutral or friendly country, and in an effort to forget about the helplessness of my current situation, the words of the great philosophers Dugin and Ilyin floated in my head. These bright minds had championed for peace, cheered the pioneers who had fought to obtain freedom and equality, and had defended the ones who were deprived. They did not give up their quest for peace. I was being framed for a crime I did not commit, and accused of doing something which I had been desperately trying to prevent, but the truth did not matter much in this fragile world. My country of origin forced me into exile because they thought I was a criminal, and from the moment I set foot on American soil, federal law enforcement officers tortured me in an effort to make me confess to a host of criminal activities.

I groaned, trying to ask for help, tossing around like an animal in pain. But instead of medical attention, I only received harsh words from the American men who were tormenting me, believing I was a terrorist.

My reprieve came the next day, when a short man with a round protruded belly shuffled in the interrogation room. He was Richard! I was so happy to see him that I burst into tears.

He told me that he recently heard I was being interrogated at the local black site in New Hampshire and he used his contacts to have me released. I was immensely grateful to this old man for saving me from the torment. Richard drove me to a private hospital and sat patiently in the waiting room while the doctors studied my condition. The surgeon inspected my wounds, and saw that I had multiple fractures in my body, including five minor concussions, three of which I received in the past year. I also had two fractured disc and a minor torn ligament. My body was in physical pain, but I managed to get to my feet and walk steadily.

However, it did not take me very long to find out how I was framed for the drone attacks on the Russian gas field in Urengoykoye. After freeing me from the American ghost prison, Richard gradually explained what happened in Siberia. He admitted that he launched those unmanned drones packed with explosives to destroy all of Russia's pipelines, in order to control the governor of the region.

I asked him why he etched my name on the drones and framed me for it. My question made Richard chuckle in amusement, and he said he thought I understood why he framed me. When I demanded an explanation, Richard said the American intelligence bureaus were beginning to suspect me of being a Russian agent, so he wanted to save me from suspicions and framed me to the Russians hoping they would list me as a wanted criminal and distribute arrest warrants for me all over the Eurasian continent. Richard tried to calm me down by saying that once the American officials saw that Russian police were trying to arrest me, they believed that I was loyal to the NSA. I found this line of reasoning to be very unusual, but decided not to argue with Richard. The man had actually rescued me from the New Hampshire black site prison, so I knew I had to be grateful.

My feelings were hurt to see Richard intentionally framed me for the bombing attack on Russian energy sectors, and I saw a repeat of this kind of behavior several years later. It was a series of shooting in Paris, around the middle of 2015, but the attacks were organized by a man who was a long-time employee of Richard. The man was of Italian origins but had lived in the United States for a long time, and he also hired numerous international mercenaries to frame young Middle Eastern and North African men for bombings and knife attacks. The Paris attacks in 2015 sent the international security forces in shock, because they did not understand how dozens of terrorists was detonating bombs and other explosives in clubs and party houses without being detected by police or watchful locals. The Interpol and Paris police did not know that the attacks were part of a larger plan of establishing the formidability of Project ISIS, a terror group controlled by the Italian criminal's mercenaries. French police kept continued to target the obvious Arab terror suspects and made scores of arrests in Bataclan, where the worst carnage took place. Several gunmen burst into the venue, firing indiscriminately, killing ninety people within minutes. Those mercenaries posing as Arab terrorists held hundreds of injured locals as hostage before the police stormed the theater, and killed most of the mercenaries. The Italian mercenary leader, who was a dedicated employee learned many of these tactics from Richard continued to use his skills to create fake terrorist groups in the Middle East, such as ISIS and other less popular factions.

The Arab and North African men who were arrested by French police all readily admitted that they walked into bars with explosives strapped to their bodies and blew themselves up for Alla and Mahomet, but they could not state specific facts, such as who or where the weapons and explosives came from. Some Europol detectives suspected that those men who were caught were being coerced into saying these statements and they discovered that most of the men were under duress. Their wife, daughter or sister were in the custody of the Italian man, who threatened to kill them if they did not assume full responsibility for the bombings.

Many more incidents such as these took place in the following years, and I was indisposed for the most part, and could do little to combat the resourceful mercenaries who kept up a torrent of attacks on major cities and government infrastructures.

My birthmother had loved me unconditionally but was seized away from me at a tender age. I was condemned to live a lonely life, salvaging the remnants of her near-forgotten love.

I missed her dearly. I don't think I would have mourned my mother so much if she had died a natural death. But the very fact that she died because of me caused my heart to be pained. What a tragedy was my fault! She died because of my stupidity. Why did I interfere on that fateful day? The dearest birthmother was shot because of me. Her body was ripped apart because of the mistakes of a son she was cursed with. I could never forgive myself. I could never forget about the dreadful incident. It haunted me then and it still haunts me now. I wish I could ask for her forgiveness.

I wish for one day I could forgive myself.

Nevertheless, it was pieces of that fierce love that kept me alive and kept my mind sane when I languished in a Russian orphanage, thousands of miles away from family or friends. For three years, I lived under the care of State, and along with dozens of children, spent my days starving and ailing in an overcrowded hut that was infested with lice, rats and roaches. In the Siberian orphanage, I had learned how formidable a foe the winter could become. Prior to moving to Russia, I had experienced only the predictable London weather. Now, I had to brave snow storms and desolate blizzards which knocked me off my slender feet the moment I ventured outside.

The Soviet state shelters were remarkably generous towards us. The children's house was always kept intricately clean and workers constantly doused us with disinfectant to prevent us from falling ill. However, the private houses for children were not so well organized, and I had the misfortune of ending in one of those. Our winter clothes were terribly inadequate. For one whole year, I was not given any socks and had to resort to wrapping my old undershirt around my feet to keep them from succumbing to frostbite. Thousands of lice bit into my clothes and clawed my skin, causing painful sores.

My toes would become inflamed from wearing the same boot I had brought with me eleven months earlier. I noticed months later that it was due to the size of my feet- I was a growing child and the small shoes no longer accommodated my long feet.

I compensated for the small size by not wearing socks, so that I could fit slightly more easily into the old tattered shoes but that came at a price: my toes would turn into ice within minutes of walking in the snow. My most prized possession in the private orphanage had been a thin moldy blanket that provided some shelter to the icy wind that whistled through the lodgings. For years, I suffered from diarrhea, hunger and cold. But I willed myself to stay alive for the sake of my mother who died trying to protect me. I had to live so I could keep loving her and cherish her memory. I had to live so she would not have died in vain. And I promised to build orphanages and homeless shelters and open many charity organizations in my mother's name. And so, I survived.

Years later, when I was sent to the United States, I encountered an enigmatic déjà vu as soon as my eyes fell on the Russian woman who lived next door. She made soup for us whenever any neighbors got sick. She helped everyone out with everything she could do. She would ask us if we needed any food or medicine. She would always come with a young boy, no older than ten- exactly my age when my own mother had passed away. I felt a tug at my heart, as though my mother had returned to this world and was watching over me. I have to admit I slightly envied the young child who I later discovered was adopted by the Russian woman, but nevertheless, the family's love affected me to the point that I decided to keep tabs on the family as if it were my own.

Richard must have drawn dramatic conclusions about my relationship with the Russian woman and perhaps even suspected that the children belonged to me. Nothing else could shed light on why he would hire professional killers to murder her in cold blood.

I knew once Richard goes after someone, no one can protect him or her. So, I began to devote a portion of my time to protect the Russian woman and her six children. I didn't want her to know she was in danger so the I would keep my distance and try to protect them from afar.

However, the second near-disaster took place not long after I had thwarted the two assassins at my foster mother's hospital.

It was early January of 1997 when a terrible carnage was about to unfold. I had been in Washington D.C. for a mission briefing. My foster mother's eldest son, Adam, was leading a congregation of worshipers at a local place of worship in the suburbs of Brooklyn. It was meant to be a night-long prayer and the thirteen-year-old boy, who I had always considered to be my very own brother, was conducting priestly duties in a divine fashion near his technical high school.

It was around midnight when the attack happened. Three gunmen, armed with assault rifles, stormed into the compound and opened fire on the devotees. Fortunately, there were no casualties because it was at the time, the prayer was nearing its conclusion and the worshippers had fallen into a farewell prostration which was customary at the end of each round of prayer. While the assailants fired, five security officials who were protecting the boy quickly overpowered the attackers and handed them over to the police at New York's 63rd police precinct.

I had learned on the attack on Adam the following morning from the local news. What I didn't know then was who the security officers were who had magically appeared to protect my brother. I learned much later that the security personnel had been hired by Vasily and Igor, my old friends from Russia who had come to visit me while I was languishing in prison, awaiting inevitable execution. When they asked me if there was anything I needed, I told them I had a family in New York. I begged them to look after them and take care of my family like their own- should I die. Before leaving the visiting room, Vasily and Igor had promised to look after my family and took their leave. I broke down in long sobs moments after they exited the visiting booth. Igor had taken my words literally and hired a two-man security team to shadow each member of my foster family. It was only when Igor noticed there were attackers after them did he increase security and hired additional men to protect my mother.

I wanted to believe the attack on Adam was a random act of hate crime, or a horrible coincidence, but it was the second attack on the Russian woman's family that astounded and horrified me.

In the summer of 1998, Igor's men apprehended a six-man hit team who had broken into the Russian woman's house. She was alone, with only her two youngest children. The assailants were carrying duffel bags filled with hammers, nails, scalpels and other gruesome torture equipment.

December, 1998

Richard continued to entrust important tasks for me. Richard welcomed me to his house, but did not rise to greet me. He complained of knee pain and requested me to get his reading glass so he could sign my forms and give me authorization to travel with his NSA undercover tactical unit. I searched for the eye glasses in the small library, but it was not there. The bedroom door was ajar, so I decided to search it as well. Once inside, my eyes widened. Every square inch of the entire wall was covered in nude pictures, and life-sized framed photos. The face of the woman looked familiar. I gave a quick second glance at the image and bit back a sharp intake of breath. Cynthia! All of these pictures belonged to Cynthia. She was posing naked in these photos, and it looked as though a professional photographer had taken these pictures. Hundreds of nude shots! I wondered why Richard had adorned his bedroom walls with her undressed photos, so I returned to the foyer and asked Richard about the pictures in his bedroom. I felt awkward in questioning him, but I loved Cynthia and those images disturbed me. Richard was not bothered by my questions, and he said Cynthia does modeling for him at home, because he often tries to paint her himself and personally practices his photography skills and took all the photos himself. This was the reason why he made her pose naked and kept those beautiful images framed and hung on his bedroom wall. Richard simply stated that he was proud of his beautiful daughter and wanted to keep the beauty of Cynthia alive in his memory forever. He also confided in me that he hoped Cynthia would one day get a chance to model for famous magazines. He spoke with such warmth and sincerity that I thought it was not a bizarre practice, because perhaps that was normal behavior in Germany, Austria and the USA. I had come to America directly from Russia so my knowledge in arts and photography was limited, and since I did not understand the western culture too well, I did not feel as though I had the right to judge him.

The next month, I was invited to provide security to a press briefing in the South Lawn of the White House in Washington D.C. where the American president was scheduled to meet with foreign dignitaries. Along with three black ops special agents of the NSA, eleven Secret Service members patrolled the area vigorously, because a week earlier, the Defense Department received an anonymous threat about someone who might try to assassinate the American leader. Security was heightened and beefed up ahead of the meeting and I was ready with my long-range weapon.

I agreed to be part of the presidential security team because Richard had begged me to take the job, and he said since the president knew me personally and trusted me, I would be able to protect him properly.

It was true I knew the president, because he personally tasked me with several missions in Serbia and wanted me to find the truth about who was behind the Bosnian genocide. The American president was very eager to stop the massacre of innocent Bosnian civilians in Yugoslavia and he tried to use NATO to stop the Serbian warlords from killing people.

After I returned from the mission with a special Navy SEAL team, he awarded each member of the team a silver honor medal, but since I was technically a foreigner and was not an American national, the president gifted me his watch as a thank-you gesture. I was very touched and grateful for his kindness. So, when I heard his life was in danger, I agreed to help the Secret Service protect him.

I don't remember what happened that evening in front of the White House. I had left my weapon unattended for a few seconds to help an elderly politician cross the grassy lawn, when my telescopic rifle disappeared. I could not find it anywhere. This was worrying for me, because the president had just stood on his podium and was starting a speech, and I could not find my service weapon. I

considered radioing my supervisor and alerting him that my weapon was missing, but at that moment, I heard a gunshot. Someone had taken a shot at the U.S. president!

I looked around at the area where the shot originated from and was searching for the culprit but I could not see anyone.

Seconds later, dozens of Secret Service agents jumped over me, pinned me to the ground, and arrested me most violently.

I had no idea what was going on, until they showed me the weapon that was used to fire shots at the president. It was my weapon! Someone had used my rifle to try to kill the president. I protested vehemently, and told the security men that moments before the gunfire started, I had lost my weapon. No one believed me, and they thought I was trying to cover up my crime, by claiming I lost the weapon. It had my fingerprints on it, and the Secret Service agents were cursing me with vicious rage, calling me a Russian assassin and cold-blooded killer. This behavior was shocking to me, because I knew some of the men who were questioning me. Hours earlier, I had served with them in the White House protective detail as their comrade. Now, they pretended not to even know me. Those American presidential guards refused to even address me by my name or even look at me.

Within hours, they shipped me off to a CIA secret facility outside Langley. I faced the most brutal torture in CIA custody. For five days, they kept me without food, torturing me constantly and forcing me to stay awake. The guards rattled the bars of the cell every ten minutes to make sure I was not sleeping. The tiny cell was heavily lighted with fluorescent bulbs and loud music burst from overhead microphone.

They started questioning me. The useless lines were repeated thousands of times. They asked me why I wanted to kill their president. Each time, I answered truthfully, and told them I was trying to protect the president. But my reply enraged the interrogators, and they punched me hundreds of times, waterboarding me between sessions. It was a terrible ordeal for me.

I was especially sad because the truth was I liked the American president very much. He was a kind man, and he sincerely wanted to stop wars in the Balkans and Yugoslavia. He was also very grateful to me when I saved his life from a Serbian terrorist that was trying to carry out a suicide bomb attack to kill him in revenge for bombing Belgrade. I used my body as a shield and defended from that assassin, and since then, the president promised to take care of me.

I was curious at how the Serbian assassin was able to come so close to the American leader, since security was supposed to be very strict in the Capital, but I later discovered that the killer was allowed inside the restricted space by an insider in the NSA. I never found out the man's real name, but I knew that some members of the Secret Service were corrupt and was helping the Serbian assassin. I was not sure why someone wanted the president dead, but it was most probably due to his foreign policy. Someone or some intelligence chief was upset with him and was trying to remove him from power. I also knew the same group had threatened Congress members to impeach the U.S. president in an attempt to remove him from office. When they still couldn't get rid of him, they tried to kill him again, but this time, the killer wanted to frame me for the crime and used my weapon to fire the shots.

I told all this to one of the less violent CIA officers who was questioning me, and he finally agreed to follow my lead and investigate the attack on the president. One week later, he returned to my cell, and said that he personally spoke to the President and asked him about me. The president said he knew me well, and would trust me with his life.

Finally, CIA's clandestine investigative committee identified the real shooter who was trying to frame me. It was an American military's Lieutenant Commander who was also a close associate of Cynthia's stepfather. Richard and the Lieutenant Commander worked in the NSA together many years ago, and together, they wanted to get rid of the American president.

The CIA released me from the dreadful prison and did not charge me with any crimes. I was extremely hurt by the treatment that was meted out to me. I was so young, and I was very loyal to my cause, and I risked my life countless times to save ordinary American citizens, but those people believed I was the enemy.

When I was free, I swore I would not live in this country any longer and as soon as I had the chance, I would leave for Europe and live there, away from America. It was unpleasant to see that some Americans could be so cordial and friendly on the outside and could become so hateful and rude whenever they wanted to in an instant. At that time, I believed all Americans were like this, but many years later, I found out that the people who were interrogating and torturing me were not the real criminals. They had really believed that I was an assassin. They didn't know I was framed.

I discovered the identity of the person who had framed me for the terrible crime. It was Richard, the Austrian man who was given unlimited power in the NSA and had his very own black ops unit working for him.

I was patriot and loyal and got really sad that they believed I was the enemy when I went against the world to protect this nation.

I was swearing I won't stay here for one more day and I'll leave this country the day I got free and live in Europe.

I couldn't believe that they were so extremely friendly on the outside and could be so hateful and rude when they wanted to. I thought all Americans are like this. But I was wrong.

No American ever framed me for something I didn't do, and not one of them ever backstabbed me or went out of their way to incite war or hatred. They only did what they believed was right. I realized they were the victims of manipulation.

When I realized the lieutenant commander was the culprit, and he had acted under the instruction of Richard, I stopped hating the ordinary American servicemen so much. I appreciated them and forgave them because even in the ugly CIA prison cell, I made a great friend, Matthew. He was the CIA officer who went out of his way to verify my story, and he didn't call me a liar and investigated the entire affair with so much hard work. For him, I got freedom again.

Although I was free again, I couldn't immediately stop the second war that was about to take place in the following year.

I was arrested yet again for a crime I did not commit.

The first car I purchased in America was a bright red Mercury Cougar. It was certainly not the latest model, but I had borrowed some money from Richard and went to a car dealer and purchased it. I loved the car and spent all my meager savings in refurbishing and repainting the vehicle. I installed a brand-new headlight, and a high-powered speaker to listen to rock music. Cynthia was proud of the second-hand car, and she asked to ride on it one morning. I agreed to pick her up from her father's house, and I raced down the road and drove into the highway. Soon, it was time for me to drop her off to her house, and since it was a hot summer day, Cynthia insisted we keep the roof open. She greatly enjoyed the car ride, and stood on the front seat, wearing only her bikini suit. I parked in front of the house, and waited until Cynthia disappeared inside and then left. But after driving less than a city block, I noticed Cynthia's purse was on the seat. She had forgotten to take it with her, so I returned to her house to return it. I was about to knock on the door, when I heard shouts and screams. It was Richard, and he sounded very angry. I could hear Cynthia yelling at him, saying something about how she liked my new car. It disturbed me greatly to hear the father-daughter arguments, so I decided to leave without interrupting their private discussions. However, just as I was about to turn away, I heard a scream. It sounded like Cynthia's voice. I rushed to the door and knocked loudly, but no one answered. I heard Cynthia cry out in pain, and I was afraid she was injured, so I ran to the other side of the house, and looked through one of the large French windows but there was another sharp cry and subsequent shouting and between the draperies, I saw that Cynthia was bent over one of the living room sofa and Richard was holding a belt. I saw several people standing in the living room area, and Richard towering angrily holding his trouser belt. He was surrounded by two men in police uniform and they were grabbing Cynthia's arms, holding her down against the sofa. Cynthia was fighting them, and I heard Richard ordering Cynthia to lower her trousers and underwear so he could beat her on the skin. Cynthia kicked one of the men and tried to squirm away, but the other policeman grabbed her legs. She was trembling in fury. Helpless, she obeyed her father and exposed her behind. Then I saw Richard raising the belt and whip Cynthia directly on her skin over and over. I banged on the window to interrupt and stop Richard from hurting Cynthia, but they did not seem to hear me. To me, this kind of treatment seemed unusual, but I was confused because I was a Russian boy, and I thought I did not understand the cultures and ways of American or Western European fathers. Maybe they were always this strict with their adult children. Cynthia was screaming in pain, and Richard kept shouting at her about why she rode on my car in a bikini suit, and he called her a prostitute. I was livid in anger, and kicked the window, but the glass must have been bullet-resistant so it did not break. I saw one of the policemen leering at Cynthia's exposed body part, and when Richard saw that they were grinning at her humiliation, he raised the belt and whipped them on the face several times, before resuming the blows on Cynthia's bare behind. I lost track of time, but it seemed like he whipped her for hours for behaving in a lewd manner with me in the car. Cynthia was protesting loudly, but Richard told her he was a good and protective father who wanted his daughter to be a good and decent girl.

The very next day, Cynthia met with me secretly and told me what her father did. She cursed and yelled a lot and said she wanted to move out of his house immediately. I sympathized with Cynthia, and I assured her that I would help her. I began to save all my money and looked for a small room to rent. For the next few days, I skipped my day job and took Cynthia to search for apartments or rooms we could sublet.

I felt sad about what Cynthia was going through. I knew her father was strict and he undoubtedly wanted the best for her, but when she complained about how her father beat her with a belt several times in the past month, I felt he took discipline too far. Cynthia was not an evil person. She was a sweet young woman with a pleasant demeanor, and while she occasionally shouted and argued with those around her, it did not seem too violent to me. After all, most children raised in the United States behaved in such a rash manner, and while it seemed shocking to me upon first arriving in America, many youngsters daringly talked back to their parents, and showed almost zero respect to their elderly. It took me some time to get used to this trend, but I was surprised that Richard was not accepting Cynthia's outburst as the norm. Only once have I witnessed Richard berating Cynthia, and he had lifted her body and thrown her on the living room sofa, because she forgot to kiss him goodnight after we shared a hearty dinner. However, I did not fail to remind Cynthia to be understanding and patient with her father, because he was a very busy man with many worries plaguing him each day.

I asked Cynthia why Richard was so angry at her that day, and she told me Richard once more attempted beat her into submission, but this time, Cynthia tried to stop the abuse, and she told me how she had hit her father and grabbed his whipping belt so he could not hurt her, but he then kept four police deputy officers on guard to watch her and hold Cynthia at gun point while he administered the harsh disciplinary punishment. In the few years that I had been in the United States, I never saw any father beating his adult daughter with a trouser belt, and so I found it strange that Richard used the belt on Cynthia over such a trivial matter. Then I had thought German or Austrian families liked to keep strong discipline with kids, and perhaps it was due to Richard's German roots that he treated his daughter this way, but Cynthia was very angry after that and she told me she wanted to leave with me to another state. I continued to take her out on several dates but since I was also working full-time at a military intelligence barrack as part of my cover job in Richard's NSA black ops, I could not help Cynthia as much as I had hoped to do. One evening, I dropped Cynthia at a grocery store and headed to work. Just then, a police raid took place, and uniformed men swarmed my workplace, and they found many rounds of ammunition in my office room, as well as drugs and explosives. I do not know who planted it there, but the police immediately placed me under arrest.

My time in prison was worse than hell, and I had no contact with Cynthia. She did not come to visit me, and this made me a little worried, but I assumed she must have been busy, or perhaps she did not even know I was locked up. Only after I was released from jail did I find out that Cynthia herself went through a different kind of ordeal. When Richard whipped her with a belt, she eventually moved out of his house, and one month later, rented a small apartment several miles away from him. She was living alone in that apartment, when burglars broke into the residence and vandalized the entire space. They beat Cynthia with rubber truncheon and tied her to the ceiling fan before breaking her toenails. Just when they were about to beat the soles of her feet, Richard had arrived to visit her, and the burglars immediately ran away. Cynthia, who had been angry with her father for beating her with his pant belt, was pleased to see him this day. Richard immediately took Cynthia to a hospital and stayed with her until she recovered. He also asked her to move back with him and this time, she readily agreed. I had learnt of all this many days after my release from prison, but Cynthia filled me in on the details. Between fits of sobs, Cynthia also told me what had happened one week after she moved back with her father. Richard became angry with her for not having breakfast together, and he beat her with a whip. Cynthia became furious again and moved out of his house. This time, she rented a small room inside the house of an old man. Again, the first night she stayed in the new house was filled with horror. No sooner had she gone to sleep, five armed and masked men entered her room, and applied electric shock to Cynthia using a taser gun, and tied her up, and nearly beat her senseless, and tore off half of the hair on her head. I was in prison on the fake weapons charge that day, so I was unable to be with Cynthia and protect her, but Richard came a few minutes later and tried to save her from the criminals. Cynthia begged her father to help her but she also asked him how he knew she was in trouble. In her mind, Cynthia was beginning to suspect that her father somehow knew about these attacks, and every time she moved out of his house, he rescued her from an attack and made her move back with him. However, as soon as Cynthia suspected her father of colluding with the criminals, the masked men began to attack Richard as well, and hit him a few times, and eventually tied him up next to Cynthia. Then the police siren was heard and the intruders left them and ran away. Cynthia and Richard were rescued by the police and once more, she was very grateful to her father for saving her life, and agreed to move back to his house, because she was too frightened to live on her own. This pattern continued four times, as Cynthia did try to escape her father's iron rule, but failed each time. However, after I got away from jail, I saw Cynthia was shaken from her experience and I investigated who the criminals were, and I tracked down three men whose police record showed they were involved in a burglary at Cynthia's place of residence. I kidnapped one of the criminals from his house, and personally questioned each one of them very rigorously, and even threatened to hand them over to the police department, when they finally agreed to tell me who hired them. They said they were employees of a shell corporation, which I discovered was funded directly by Richard's black ops company. They also reluctantly admitted that they were ordered by him to scare his daughter into making her want to come back to him, so each time she took an apartment of her own, he sent these paid criminals to beat her and torture her, and he would always show up minutes later. They also told me they had specific orders not to hurt Cynthia to severely but only had to frighten her enough, so she would agree to move in with her father. I then asked one of the criminals why they tortured and beat up Richard if he was actually hiring them, and the man said that in order to convince Cynthia that Richard was not involved in the attacks, they were ordered by Richard to beat him very mildly in front of Cynthia so she does not suspect him of planning and ordering the entire attack. My mind was whirring after hearing these narratives. I was shocked by the levels of trickery and manipulations, and could not understand why Richard had gone through so much trouble to make sure his daughter lived with him in the same house.

My supervisor was Brigadier General Harry Gage, a former one-star general officer with the United States Marine Corps. Although he was retired, he had connections with the military, and often told me stories about his days in the world war. Particularly, Brigadier General Gage discussed his late son with me. I had learned that the young man was twenty-seven years old when he died in the Vietnam War. The American officer was in terrible grief over the loss of his only son, and he often told me I reminded him of his boy. I also listened eagerly to his stories about his own battles during the Second World War. He had served under the direct command of the famed

American General Patton in Europe. I was fascinated by the war stories he told me, and was grateful for his kind behavior towards me. When he heard about my arrest, he came to the prison to see me. The policemen who were hired by Richard to guard Cynthia were harassing me in the cell, and they threatened to hand me over to the most violent prisoners in the Super-Max sector so those inmates could assault me. Some of the policemen taunted me, saying since I am the youngest person in this jail, my fresh meat would be perfect for all the sexual predators in the holding cells.

While they berated and threatened me, Brigadier General Gage showed up outside the cell door. He spoke to me urgently through the bars, and wanted to know how he could help. "I heard what those cops said they would do to you, and I am telling you son, this jail is notorious for violent conmen, and is no place for a kid like you." He paused. "You won't make it through the week. What evidence are they holding against you?"

I answered truthfully, and said that police found several machine guns, cartons of explosives, and illegal drugs in my room. "They would not believe those items are not mines." I lamented. "Someone must have planted it there, but no one believes me. In this county, possession of illegal arms and drugs calls for life in prison at the very least."

The military officer looked bereaved, and finally said he would do everything in his power to get me out of here. "I am not letting a young kid like you rot away in prison. You are smart and have potential, and our world needs young men like you in the field."

I asked, "But how can you help me, sir? The evidence they have is foolproof. All four policemen who searched my room are now testifying to the judges. I have zero defense."

"But there is a way." I looked very puzzled, so the Harry Gage explained that he would go to the courts and claim responsibility for my alleged crime. He decided to testify in front of the judge that those weapons and drugs belonged to him. I protested vehemently and begged him not to risk his career and his freedom for my sake, but the old American general said he lost one son already in the Vietnam War, and he was not prepared to lose another one in a lousy prison sentence. I insisted that I would be fine here, but he refused to listen to my protests and left the jail.

I felt terribly guilty about what the Brigadier General was about to do in order to save me from a life sentence. For the next few days, I was forced to appear in court, and with horror, I watched as the four policemen testified under oath that I possessed illegal weapons and marijuana and stored it in my room. In a speedy trial, the judge sentenced me to life in prison without even asking me if I pleaded guilty. The next morning, a prison van drove me to the maximum-security penitentiary. As per the promise of the policemen who first arrested me, I was singled out as a snitch and immediately became a target for the prisoners.

Within fifteen minutes after being thrown into the prison yard, I was beaten by at least fifty heavy set prisoners. The guards in the watchtower purposefully ignored my screams of pain and ignored the commotion. The inmates all targeted me as though I was a stray dog, and they kicked me viciously in my rib bones, trampling over my head in the most undignified manner. I was nearly senseless in agony, and felt several cracked bones in my fingers and arm. I was crawling and rolling on the ground in excruciating pain, trying to get away from the prisoners, but they kicked me repeatedly until I became completely unconscious.

Hours later, I awoke at the prison infirmary. A hard-eyed nurse applied a cold pack wordlessly on my arm and left. I was alone in the ward, and with no one to witness my weakness, I burst into tears, crying into the dark, feeling more helpless than anyone on earth. I don't know how long I cried, but soon it was daylight, and a guard marched me back to my cell. He seemed a little kind, so I used the opportunity to ask him if I could make a phone call. He agreed and I called Cynthia's number and waited. After the seventh ring, a male voice answered. I recognized it at once as Richard's voice. He sounded very cheerful and asked me about my condition. I told him how I had been beaten by the prisoners, and he promised to help me.

The very next morning, guards told me I had a visitor. It was Richard. Although I was still upset with him for beating Cynthia in such a humiliating manner, I was grateful that he showed some genuine concern for my wellbeing. He was probably a good-hearted man after all, who lived by old-fashioned rules about disciplining their children with an iron fist. During the hour-long meeting, Richard told me that he hired a lawyer to appeal my case. I asked him about Brigadier General Harry Gage. As soon as he heard the name, Richard became very angry and cursed the American general.

I expressed my shock, and Richard replied slowly, "You do not know?"

"Know what?" I asked, thoroughly stupefied.

"I have recently found out who was framing you and placed those weapons in your dorm room."

"Who was it?" I inquired, leaning forward in my seat.

"It was Harry Gage, the American officer who came to visit you the other day." Richard replied harshly. "Your own boss betrayed you."

"The Brigadier General?" I replied. "It is impossible! He promised to help me. He treats me like his son."

"Well, he betrayed you and tried to get you locked away in prison for life." Richard said flatly, trying to straighten his stout figure as he smiled with confidence.

"But why?" I asked. "Why would he ever do that to me?"

"Maybe this is the reason." Richard said, removing an envelope from his pocket. "These pictures were taken two days ago."

I glanced at the images. It showed Harry Gage sitting in a park bench, and familiar looking young woman seated next to him. The second image gave a clearer view of the woman. It was Cynthia! What was she doing in a park bench with my girlfriend? I was very confused.

"As you can see," Richard continued, "that man framed you in illegal arms and drug cases so you could stay locked up for the rest of his life. Ever since you were in jail, Harry Gage has been going out with my daughter."

"But I know Brigadier General Gage! I know him!" I shouted. "He is an elderly honorable man. He has a wife."

Richard smiled abruptly and clicked his tongue. "Remember! He put you in jail so he could have Cynthia all to himself." He was still grinning in a strange way, his teeth almost protruding from his face.

I did not want to believe anything Richard said, but it made more and more sense to me. What if I had misjudged everything? Maybe the American brigadier general who I looked up to all these years was not a man of honor. I was still absorbed in these worrying thoughts when I was once more shuttled to another section of the prison. It was called the hard labor area, where serious offenders were ordered to work sixteen hours each day, sawing trees, and moving bricks from one place to another. It was situated ten miles away from locality, and out of the prison area, but the area was secured by barbed wires. The guards screamed at me and forced me to begin working. I was a little surprised because I thought hard labor was a concept that existed only in certain parts of Europe; I did not know American jails applied inhuman working conditions for felons who were serving life in prison. My body was still sore from the beating I got a week earlier, and I was having difficulty moving the heavy loads of brick to the trucks, but as soon as I slowed down to rest for a moment, a guard would appear from nowhere and strike me sharply with a baton. It was not only painful but extremely humiliating.

When we were driven back to the main prison building, the guards instructed all the worker inmates to enter the shower area. It was a filthy public area with rusty pipes and moldy tiles. I noticed that all the dangerous inmates were inside so I refused to enter, but the guards pushed me inside and shut the gate behind me. Suddenly I was alone among a hundred violent prisoners in the public shower. I felt afraid for the first time, and knew I could not survive another beating. I edged to the wall, trying to remain invisible but they were all pointing and murmuring at me, and then one of them came nearer and held a poster sized picture with a name and several printed lines next to my head. I peered and saw it was my picture in the poster. The man murmured to his partner and nodded after confirming my identity. I was being deliberately targeted. Someone had given my photograph and name to these prisoners for some inexplicable reason! Then, without warning, a huge man with a mustache punched me with such force, I fell to the tiled floor, nearly crashing my skull fatally. Then he grabbed my throat, squeezing my neck aggressively, while two of the prisoners grabbed me and tore off my clothes, while the first man who hit me began to kick me in the groin area. The first blow made me nearly senseless with terror, as hot pain shot up to my chest and burned my eyes, until I was momentarily blinded. But the blows did not stop. He kept kicking me with more force until I felt blood vessels in my abdomen bursting and my intestines were bloating with internal bleeding. I was sure I was going to die. My legs gave away for I had no more strength to remain on my feet. But the prisoners were not finished torturing me. One of them barked an order, and the rest of them threw me over a metal chair and assaulted me taking turns. After some time, one of them grabbed a toilet bowl cleaner and used it to abuse and torture me. I could not tolerate the humiliation and pain, so I tried to scream in anger, but somehow, no matter how hard I tried, my throat would not emanate any sound. I did not know that my voice box was damaged. My body trembled, not from pain, but from rage. I gulped in air, and again tried to scream, and shout so loudly that the entire city and country's population could hear me. Oh, how angry I was! For the first time in my life, I wanted revenge. I wanted to spill the blood from the dirty hearts of these men who were touching my body and assaulting me. I wished death and fire upon them, and hoped that each one of the rapists burn in an eternal hell, but at the same time, I felt unhappy with the thought. No, hell would be too merciful for these animals who break a brotherly trust and sexually abuse other men. God was too gentle because in his hell, no man would be raped. Then how could they feel the agony I was experiencing? Great ragged sobs consumed me as I wished these prison inmates would get new skin and fresh meat each time it was burned to charcoal so they could feel the agony of a blazing flame for ever and ever. I was half dead with agony but in that semi-conscious state, I heard another scream. An African-American prisoner was being beaten with a belt by the same fat man who first kicked me. The victim was being ordered to assault me along with everyone else, but he was refusing to do so. My eyes were so swollen but I tried to crack them open and peer at what was going on. No matter how much the prisoners were beating the black man, he refused to touch or abuse me. Minutes later, I saw him fall to the ground, his braided hair soaked with blood. I realized the man was probably dead. His bellows were so loud that the guards from the other sections of the prison heard the commotion and came

bursting in the shower area. One of them noticed my bruised and beaten body lying over the chair and he took me to the infirmary. While I was being carried away, I heard the guards shout for an ambulance. One of them said the black man was dead. Although I was only half-awake, part of my mind became numb with grief. There was only one man who refused to assault me, only one person who stood by his honor and refused to disgrace a young man by abusing him, and for this, he was dead. It was the norm in prisons for each inmate to be forced to commit the same crimes in order to make them all collectively guilty so that no one could betray the other to the guards, and this was why the other prisoners were forcing the African-American inmate to sexually assault me. But he chose to be beaten to death rather than assault me. I felt such sadness in my chest, that I was beginning to choke. I couldn't breathe anymore. From a distant hole, like a faraway tunnel, I heard someone shouting my name. Then a giant mask covered my face. Bursts of air were forced into my lungs. And I fell into a death-like asleep.

I don't know if it was the next week or the next day, but a prison doctor told me I had a splintered nose and a broken eye socket, in addition to cracked ribs, but would technically live, so he sent me back to my cell. My face was still puffed from the bruises, bandages covering my arms and legs. My stomach was in constant and terrible pain, and I could not even eat a morsel or bread or porridge without getting sick.

I did not even hear the announcement of the arrival of a visitor. Looking up at the grave face, I realized it was none other than the American Brigadier General. The elderly man was gripping the bars of my cell door and was peering down at my injured body.

"Oh, my god!" He cried. "Who did this to you?"

I ignored his question and remained seated in the hard cell floor. The military officer knelt outside the gate and asked more urgently. "How have you been?"

I remembered what Richard had said. I knew this man pretended to be my friend and framed me for the crimes by placing dangerous weapons and drugs in my room. In sudden burst of anger, I said, "Thanks to you, I have suffered unspeakable horrors!"

The man looked genuinely confused, and again asked me why I was so angry.

"You framed me, sir, and you made sure I was in jail." I choked out, blinking furiously against the tears that threatened to spill out of my eyes like ocean tides.

"What are you talking about?" He repeated.

"I know all about it, sir! I know you planned this. You framed me for these crimes and had me sent away to jail! I should never have trusted you!"

This time Harry Gage did not reply. He looked stunned and worried at the same time.

I continued to shout. "You Americans! Always pretending to be nice and friendly but never an honest friend. I should have known that you would exploit my Russian background and frame me for your crimes. I am only sorry that I trusted you. I really loved you like a father."

"I wish I knew what you mean," the brigadier general said softly. His tall and thin figure almost looked frail.

"They assaulted me here. The prisoners all beat me and abused me until all I wanted to do was die," I shouted. I felt incensed that he refused to admit his guilt, so I finally asked him. "Tell me, sir, was she really worth it? Was Cynthia worth sending me away to a filthy prison for life?"

Brigadier General Gage shook his head. "I don't even know who Cynthia is, but clearly you have been told some awful things about me. I just want you to know, son, that I will not stop trying to get you out of here."

With these words, the American officer left the prison. After several hours, my anger cooled down slightly and I began to think about what the man had said. He did not admit framing me for the crimes, and nor did he mention Cynthia. I wondered why Richard told me that Harry Gage was the man responsible for my imprisonment. He did show me photographic evidence. But in the back of my mind, I knew pictures could often be misleading.

The next morning, I made my way to the prison mess hall to have breakfast, but suddenly, inmates in the adjoining cells began to throw urine and feces at me in order to humiliate me. These were the prisoners who had assaulted me in the showers, and were now whistling and insulting me, calling me a female pig. My face was red with anger, and I wanted to crucify the men who violated the bond of male brotherhood and assaulted me in this disgusting way. I tried to shield my face and return to the cell but the guards escorted me to the van, and along with the rest of the prisoners, I was dropped off at the work field. The vast dryland was decorated with several high-flying flags. I remembered the date. It was America's victory day. July fourth was considered a joyous occasion for most Americans but on this day, the view of those star-studded banners did not comfort me. I don't know if it was due to fear or anticipation, but my teeth chattered and my body shivered beyond control, as I felt a winter virus enveloping me. American winters were harsh, not because of the temperature, but the flu and virus which racked the body and lungs like a thunderbolt, draining the strongest man of all energy and sanity.

In this darksome place, the realization of reality was sinking in my foggy mind. I was a prisoner, locked away in a horrible place, for a crime I did not commit. The field looked the same and with renewed terror, I noticed that all the men who had beaten me the first day were surrounding me. I knew they were the worst criminals in the United States, with each prisoner locked up for life for violent crimes like murder, rape, domestic violence, armed burglary, and child abuse. These human shaped animals were getting closer, and I saw they clearly carried weapons of some kind. Many had knives or other sharp objects in their hands. I backed away from them, but it was no use, because I was surrounded. With a sinking feeling in my heart, I realized that these inmates were planning to beat me again. I was to go through the same routine again and suffer the same abuse but I noticed something unusual in the work grounds. The guards were all well out of earshot. They would not even hear my screams if I called for help.

Then they all pounced at me together. I fell to the ground almost instantly. My agony was expanding at an exponential rate. I thought I was dead! With so many fractured bones in my body, I had no strength to resist their attack or fight back. I must have counted to a thousand times that I was hit on my face, torso and thigh. My body eventually became numb from the blows, but with each fist smashing into my groin, my chest stomach shook as though I was standing beside a rumbling train. Once I had lost even the little strength to fight back the men, one of the inmates once more ripped off my trousers and the rest began to assault me. It was extremely humiliating. They wanted to completely de-emascuate me. This time, there was no one to protest this vile act, and nor was anyone daring to refuse to perform such sick deed on my injured body. This went on for hours, and none of the guards even looked at this direction.

In a frenzy of tears, I cursed every man who was hurting me, and I prayed for their speedy and torturous death. Oh, God! Save and protect every single young boy from getting abused or drugged or brainwashed. Oh, God! Destroy every last remnant of those men who drug or stalk or rape other men or abuse other men sexually. Burn those men in hell, and give them a new skin each time, so they can suffer forever. Let their pain be multiplied forever! Crucify and burn them in the eternal flames of Your foreboding hell, and crush those men and their benefactors and their employers to million pieces, because your celestial wrath is not sufficient for these vile criminals and abusers. How can these disgusting men ever understand my pain when no punisher would ever sexually assault them in hell? How can they feel the agony I felt? How can they suffer like I had suffered?

I cannot defile these pages with details of the things that happened to me. I hope no one, not even the worst criminal in the world, ever faces the terrors I faced! I could never have believed a member of the human race could act in such a demeaning manner, yet it was true and it happened. I can never utter with my mouth what those horrific criminals made me do, and how much sickening and unspeakable the torture was which they put me through.

How bad and how sick can man be, that I witnessed.

Then I heard an explosion. One of the prison vans that transported us into this godforsaken place burst into flames. Then the small guard house adjacent to the field was hit by a mortar shell and was ablaze. The prisoners who were abusing me ran in all direction.

My broken body lay in a heap on the ground, and more explosion sounded all around. Then I felt the earth beneath my cheek tremble like an earthquake. Raising my face, I caught the metallic glint of a military vehicle. It was a tank! How bizarre. The tank roared down directly towards the prisoners and fired another round at the cluster of guards who were standing with their shotguns drawn. One of them flew fifty feet into the air before landing in a lifeless heap. The other guards aimed their guns and was firing at the tank, but the iron machine rolled on. I thought it was a dream. Who could be in that tank, riding in like the angel of mercy, at a time when I was sure I would die? Then the hatch opened, and a familiar head bobbed up. It was Brigadier General Harry Gage! The one-star American general came to rescue me!

He leaped from the turret and dragged me inside the armored vehicle. I tried to speak, but only groans came from my throat. Pouring a bottle of water over my face, the American officer kept reassuring me that I was safe, and that he would take me far away from this place.

In the hospital, Harry Gage visited me every day. My head hurt so badly as though it had been bludgeoned by several baseball bats. The flares of pain made me want to vomit, but I resisted the nausea and concentrated on breathing. As soon as I was capable of speaking, I apologized profusely to the man who saved me. I said I was sorry for yelling at him in prison, but the brigadier general brushed aside my words.

"I love you like my own son," he assured me. "Trust me, my kid would shout at me like a bull. A headstrong and proud young man he was, my son."

"But why do you love *me*, sir?" I repeated. "I am not your flesh or blood. I can understand that you loved your son who died in Vietnam, but why care about me?"

"Because you have the right heart, and you do look a lot like my boy." He sighed.

"Sir, can I ask you a question?"

"Why, sure!" He replied.

I slowly asked, "How did you know where to find me? In the prison, I mean?"

"Believe it or not, it was your girlfriend Cynthia who helped me with this escape plan. She had overheard her father saying he visited you at this correctional facility. Cynthia said something about Richard controlling or paying all the prison guards huge sums of money for certain services or jobs, so I knew it was not a safe place for you. And I also knew prisoners sentenced for life were often brought to the external work field and forced to do hard labor. When I went to the jail complex and could not find you there, I knew this would be the place you were at."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "I am very glad you did not ruin your career by trying to take the blame for my case."

"Well, son, don't thank me for it. The day I visited you in the cell, I went straight to the Sheriff's office and tried to turn myself in. I told them the weapons and drugs that were found in your room belonged to me, but they said they had orders to specifically arrest *you* for the crime. Not me. My lawyer was being unable to find any resources to help you either. So, I just felt I had to do something."

When he fell silent, I inquired again. "Where did you find that tank? It looked like the real heavy-duty armored vehicles used in actual battle?"

"I was given command of the Independence Day parade, and had the follow our military march into town with this muscle tank." "But I saw it fire live rounds of high explosive ammunitions!"

"I had someone service it thoroughly before the parade, to make sure none of the parts malfunctioned during the celebratory march. Then I changed my mind halfway and broke off from the crowd and decided to drive on to the prison camp and break you out. I know it was against regulations to fire missiles at civilian targets, but when I saw what those prisoners were doing to you, and how you were almost dying in there, I could not tolerate it. The prison guards were looking the other way, and I just knew I had to do something, and so I barged in with force, bulldozing the prison complex." The brigadier general heaved another long sigh. "But you need rest now, young man. I am going to be off now. I got to check on my garden and those honey bees that I collect."

"Sir, you are a honey farmer?"

"Well, not that professionally, but locals here call me a beekeeper. I have a collection of the finest honey you could want. I will bring some for you next time we meet, if you got a sweet tooth."

With these happy words, he left the hospital. Little did I know that it would be the last time I would ever see the Brigadier General.

I learned from local law enforcement agents that he had died that evening. It was a shocking sadness for me, and one I refused to believe, so I immediately rushed to the morgue at the police station to see his body myself. There he was, lying cold and gray, over a hard metal table. But the state of his body sent volleys of tears rushing down my cheeks. The old man had been bitten to death by at least a thousand angry bees. Hundreds of sharp welts and cuts covered his face, shoulders and chest. The doctor who was on duty told me the man had died from the poisonous effects of hundreds of bee stings.

I crumpled to the floor of the morgue and sobbed like a child. Here was one man in the world who loved me as his own son, and who risked his life, career and freedom to free me from the violent prison that I was in, and now he was dead, lying alone in a cold dark room. Why was life so unfair? Oh, I wish I had died in this military man's place. Since arriving in America three years ago, I have never loved a man so much. He was what a real father would have been and yet, I lost him so prematurely. Someone was now standing over me. I hastily wiped my tears, and blinked to dry out my eyes. Then I looked up. It was a police detective. He wanted to ask me some questions. I sat silently in his office and waited, and he read the autopsy report from the doctor. He casually mentioned that the death of Brigadier General Harry Gage was being logged as a homicide.

"He was murdered?" I finally spoke. "But I saw the bee stings!"

"Yes," the officer replied calmly, "but we were wondering why locals found Harry Gage's body without any protective suit."

"Suit?"

"His wife told police that the general was wearing a full beekeeping suit with long sleeves and long pants along with a hat and veil. The bees were never supposed to get to him."

"So, someone wanted to kill him?"

"We believe the bees were intentionally sent after him, in order to make it look like an accident. Doctors report clearly mentions that he was bitten after he lost consciousness. Someone had struck him in the head and after he fell senseless, the assailant yanked off his suit and masks and then sent the bees after him."

"Oh, God!" I cried. "NO! No!"

"I am sorry to give you this news," the detective consoled me. "I knew the Brigadier General meant a lot to you."

"Harry Gage was like a father to me." I murmured solemnly.

"His death will be investigated as a homicide. All we know is that someone let a swarm of bees loose upon him to make his demise look like an accident, but a neighbor did see a man enter Harry Gage's compound minutes before the accident. But don't worry. We will notify you if there any questions come up."

I was physically healthy enough to travel on my own, so I borrowed a truck and headed to the Brigadier General's honey garden to investigate the suspicious circumstances surrounding his death. Two women lived in the adjoining estate. One was the owner of the property and the other was her elderly housekeeper. The police had mentioned that the two women saw someone exchange sharp words with the Brigadier General right before he died of the bee sting. I had to find out the truth about what really happened, so I knocked on the door of the woman's house and waited on the front porch. The housekeeper answered and invited me in. I spoke urgently and asked about what happened to Harry Gage.

The woman reported that an elderly man was accompanied by two men in official police uniforms. They spoke with the American brigadier general and one of them struck the military man on his head and after he collapsed, they donned protective beekeeper suits and released a basket of stinging flies. I repeated my question several times, but the woman seemed very sure, so I finally asked her to give me a description of the man who accompanied the uniformed officers. She told me that a short stout man with balding gray hair was giving the orders. Without thinking, I showed her a family picture I always carried in my wallet. It was a Polaroid image of Richard, Cynthia and myself during Cynthia's birthday party. The elderly woman gasped when she saw the picture. With tremulous voice, she confirmed that it was Richard who had spoken to the brigadier general and then ordered the uniformed men to hit Harry Gage and set a horde of bees to bite him and sting him to death.

Such loss I was not prepared to take. The blow of losing parents at a young age, and living as a trampled orphan from my adolescence was beyond any grief I could tolerate. I wanted to pretend that this gentle and kind man did not die to leave me to become fatherless forever. My eyes were still tearful from the pain that lingered in my heart. I wanted to scream in sadness, but my voice seemed to fall dead before passing the lips. With agony, I cried to the heavens. I wanted to call the sky and the earth, the mountains and the oceans to bear witness to my misery and share in my mourning. Like a blind man, I was groping into the nothingness of my life, trying to find a path that would lead me away from this eternal darkness.

The fact that Harry Gage's death may have been a homicide was a frightening revelation for me. I did not want to believe Richard was capable of murder, but I had to find out the truth, so I went to meet Richard, but he was not home. Only Cynthia was lounging in the spacious mansion and she told me that her father had gone to Europe on an extended vacation. But I wanted to get a clear answer, so when Cynthia phoned Richard to discuss her daily routine, I asked to speak directly with him. Without much permeable, I charged Richard with being responsible for what happened to the American brigadier general. Richard immediately admitted being in the farm house, but he denied being remotely responsible for the death of the military officer. He burst into tears when I asked if he set the bees loose upon the dead man. Richard expressed indignation that I could imagine he was so heartless, and then offered me a lengthy explanation, saying he and two of the policemen actually went to Brigadier General Gage's house to warn him of potential danger, and never intended to hurt or kill him. Richard spoke to me with such warmth and sincerity, that I began to feel ashamed for suspecting the genial man and imagining that he was capable of murder. My thoughts went back to the old women who swore that they saw Richard killing the military officer, but then it was also possible that the elderly neighbor was mistaken, as age has a way of clouding one's vision or make a mind rather confused. This could be remedied easily, I thought, and before Richard hung up the telephone, I asked if he would be willing to accompany me to the farm house and personally meet the neighbors of Harry Gage. Richard agreed at once, and requested that I give him the exact address of the women's house. I ended the call, feeling much better and lighter at heart. Richard was not a bad person after all. He was Cynthia's father- I should have known he was not capable of hurting another human being. One week later, Richard was due to arrive from Europe, and with much excitement, Cynthia and I went to the Newark Airport to receive him. He was pleased to see us, and was already lounging in the spa adjacent to the arrival terminal. Since he had just landed from a long and doubtlessly tedious flight, Richard was treating himself to a full body massage. Two young men wearing bright red underwear, and looked no older than eighteen, were applying salve and ointment on his body as he relaxed. I was not surprised to see this, because Richard always took massage from young men in his home and office.

He got to his feet after seeing us and did not seem to hold any grudge against me for making those nasty accusations about the death of the Brigadier General. While speeding down the interstate highway, Richard asked the driver to go to the house of the elderly women who claimed that they saw Richard and two policemen murdering Harry Gage. Without wasting a moment, the driver sped to the destination. But when we arrived at the estate, I noticed two police patrol cars loitering about the area. A yellow warning tape surrounded the little house. I raced out of the car and approached the policeman who was standing guard. He waved me away, and said the occupants of the house was murdered this morning. The cause of death had been gunshot wounds to the head from a sniper's bullet. My head began to spin as the police sentry spoke, and I thought I would faint. Richard was standing behind me, and he helped me into

his vehicle and drove me home. Nothing of this matter made any sense to me. How could the only two witnesses who could identify Richard mysteriously end up dead just about the time Richard returned from Europe? I could not find any explanation for all these bizarre incidents, but I only felt empty sadness inside. My beloved friend was dead. Harry Gage risked his career and his life to break me out of that disgusting American prison, but I could not even thank him for his kindness, for he was no longer alive. And now, the only two people who could have positively identified the brigadier general's killer was also killed before they could meet Richard.

While this incident was taking place in the 80s, I did not give it much thought. But it was only ten years later that I found out the truth of what had happened that fateful day. I tracked down the assassins who shot those two women, and found clear evidence that the killers were hired by Richard to kill both witnesses before Richard arrived in continental United States. I felt foolish not understanding this earlier, but like everything Richard did, he was brilliant in his plannings and manipulations. He practically owned my soul and controlled my heart, until I blindly trusted and believed him, regardless of how much evidence I used to see that counteracted his actions and words. Sometimes, I think I forgive all of Richard's shortcomings because deep down in my heart, I know he loves Cynthia and wants to keep her protected from all harms, and many follies can be forgiven when it relates to a father's love for his daughter.

The trauma I faced in the American prison was too much for my young mind and broken body to bear. I was starting to believe that the United States brought bad luck on me, because ever since landing in this country, too many calamities descended on my head. So, I resolved to leave the country forever, and even contemplated returning to the Soviet Union. I was prepared to leave and even prepared a small bag with my scant belongings. I started my red car for the last time, and was about to hit the gas, when I saw a figure racing towards me. Her fluffy hair waving around her face, Cynthia hurried to me, and stood breathless. She saw the small duffel bag and realized I was leaving the country and she immediately began to shout hysterically, accusing me of being selfish and heartless. In a tearful voice, Cynthia told me she was getting sick of living with her abusive and controlling father. She complained that Richard whipped her almost every day after I was sent to prison, and no matter how many apartments she managed to rent, something terrible happens and she is always forced to return to live under his roof. Cynthia said she had no one else in the world to protect her against Richard's beatings, and begged me not to leave her. My heart was conflicted. I knew Richard did not approve of me seeing his daughter, but I also knew Cynthia needed me. After she implored most desperately to me, I could not upset her further, and I gave up my plans to leave the United States and decided to remain in this dangerous country for her sake.

Cynthia and I continued to search for a small house to rent in the suburbs, but after leaving prison, my funds were wearing out, and I did not have money to pay the bills. Eventually, I rented a small boat and docked it beside Lake Travis in Texas. I spent three months building a wooden roof and two small rooms inside the boat. Cynthia assisted me in setting the enclosure so that it could weather the occasional summer storms and remain afloat.

The boat was my home for more than a year.

Igor Korabelnikov's men were his former employees who had served faithfully under him in the GRU. He had hired several American freelance security guards to keep an eye on the Russian woman's family. The guards rigorously interrogated the intruders and discovered that they had been hired to torture the mother and kill her before kidnapping the two young children. At that time, Igor's men were unable to identify who had hired the assailants. The only clue was a burner phone of the men carried but the employer couldn't be tracked right away.

The security detail was reprimanded severely by Igor for permitting the assailants to get so close to the family, and after conducting independent investigations, Igor discovered his worst fear. More than one American guard had received a large sum of money in exchange of allowing the intruders access to the house's back door.

In order to test if his suspicions were true, Igor conducted a small experiment. He posed as a third party and offered millions of dollars to each of his security guards and asked them to betray the family. He wanted to see how many of the men would take the bait. To his surprise, most of the men took the money and reported to him immediately. They handed over the cash and informed him that someone had hired them to harm the very family they were supposed to protect. Only two guards took the money and agreed to work for the imaginary attacker.

Igor was satisfied with the results but before concluding whether his security detail was impeccable, he used another tactic. This time, he posed as a ruthless gang and sent threatening messages to his guards vowing to hurt their loved ones if they did not hand over the children to professional abductors. This time, a vast majority of his men agreed to cooperate with the criminals. It was a trying job, Igor told me afterwards, and he admitted that he could not guarantee the protection of the vulnerable family forever.

It was during early 2000 that the second attack on this family had taken place. I learned about it many years later because during that time, Richard had once again framed me for several major crimes and had me imprisoned. Two of Igor Korabelnikov's men who were former GRU officers were found shot dead in the school playground of the youngest child.

The Russian woman who I had considered to be my foster mother was living in her expansive mansion in upstate New York. All four of her sons were in boarding schools in London and Switzerland. The only child that was with her was the youngest one, a six-year-old girl.

The little girl was attending an elite Catholic school near the family residence. Because this was the only girl in the family, the mother was reluctant to allow the child to go abroad for education. Igor's men were dutifully keeping an eye on the girl when she was at school as well as when she returned home each evening, but after two of his finest officers were found dead, he raised alarm and carried out a background check on every single teacher who were teaching in the little girl's school. Two of the teachers in her all-girls Catholic school were using aliases. When Igor conducted a detailed investigation, he discovered that one of the female science teachers was recently released on parole and had been previously twice convicted of child trafficking. The other suspicious character was an English teacher in the little girl's class who had been arrested by Brussels police two years ago on charges of running a pedophile ring that abused children just a few months old. When police arrested him, they discovered twenty terabytes of child abuse images on his computer.

Igor had informed me that after the run in with the pedophile trafficking ring, his men enlisted the help of local law enforcement authorities in order to apprehend the remaining culprits. It was an exhaustive mission and one that his men were being unable to handle.

The previous week, his team observed two masked men ambushing the Russian woman and forcing her to walk into an alley at gunpoint. The men dressed in all black, jumped from an SUV and were tying her hands when the security team intervened. Igor later discovered that one of his men received half a million dollars in exchange of facilitating the kidnapping. He said he knew no security team in the world could be incorruptible and decided to take matters into his own hands. Remaining in America was not safe for the family, so he sent word to the little girl's parents that they should seriously consider moving abroad. It was a year later that the entire family relocated to India. For a while, the attacks on the Russian woman's life ceased.

Since then, I had been able to focus on my own missions without worrying much about the well-being of the Russian woman and her family.

Another decade passed without incidents. I say without incidents because the only hell I faced was on my person. I have had assassins trying to kill me on a weekly basis. This meant that my trips to my mother's resting place in Grozny had become limited. It pained me that I only got to pay my respects to her once every few months. I wished to go every month but it was especially difficult to evade detection and fly to Grozny via St. Petersburg and ensure that no one followed me. I was constantly on alert, watching the movement of every shadow that passed by me. I loved my mother too greatly to allow anyone to discover the location of her burial place and disturb her serene resting place.

I increased the precautions and crashed at different locations every fortnight. One night, I was especially tired and was drawing my bedroom curtains when the wind rustled in from the open window. Three men in two-piece fleece and neoprene balaclava masks were hiding behind the draperies, waiting to pounce on me the second I fell asleep. I was successfully able to fight them off but there was no peace in my life. I would break a glass and sprinkle the shards near my front door so that potential killers would be thwarted long enough for me to awake. Each time I checked into a hotel, I fortified the door and windows with laser rays and sensory detectors. I was constantly vigilant, always afraid.

The Serbian Conflict:

In June of 1999, Richard convinced the NATO forces to launch a daring mission against Russia. The official name for this mission was Operation Allied Force and it was believed to be targeted specifically against Yugoslavia. All NATO nations agreed to use both bombing tactics to disarm the Serbs and land ground troops into Yugoslav territory. Officially, they would serve as UN peacekeepers, but Richard had a different plan. He wanted to use the bulk of NATO forces and invade Russia using the Yugoslav issue as the main excuse. I knew Richard intended to use NATO forces to invade Russia, so I alerted Moscow about what was about to take place in the beginning of June. I begged Kremlin senior officials to support the Serbs against NATO forces and protect Russia's geopolitical interests in the Balkans. After one week, the Kremlin decided to occupy the strategically important Slatina airbase in Kosovo ahead of a NATO deployment. Crossing the Bosnia and Herzegovina overnight, the Russian paratroopers, who were part of a peacekeeping force, took

control of strategic locations in Yugoslavia before the NATO foot-soldiers arrived. But by this time, Richard already knew that the Russian peacekeepers had landed in Slatina airbase. He had a childhood friend who was in charge of the NATO troops, and he instructed that colleague to drop several thousand bombs over the Slatina airbase, in order to wipe out the Russian forces. I was fortunate enough to find out about the order and alert the Russian Airborne Forces who were stationed there. They took the necessary precautions and soon, contacted the American general, who agreed to move his men back, and avoid hurting the Russians.

August, 1999

The sweltering heat of August had nearly ground my usual outdoor activities to a standstill. I imagined this week to be an uneventful one. Just when I preparing for an evening of indoor work out, I received an alert from Dustin. My computer expert friend was relentless in keeping up with all darknet chatrooms and messages. He warned me that according to two dozen intercepted messages that passed across the trans-Atlantic cables, a number of Russian officials were preparing to launch a coordinated attack on several cities near Moscow.

I found the news incredulous. It seemed very unlikely that Russian officials would launch attack on their own soil. I asked Dustin to do a thorough investigation into the financial records and transactions of the men involved. He enlisted the help of Pavel Govorov, a Russian hacker who I had rescued from prison two years ago. Pavel was able to send us copies of phone call transcripts as well as receipts of major purchases.

We traced the bomb making materials to the center of *Roskonversvzryvtse*, a scientific research institute in Moscow. Apparently, it was an illegal business that traded explosives and TNT. Thousands of tons of explosive substances passed through the institute. The institute purchased explosives from the military for utilization and conversion, or from chemical factories for research. It then sold explosives to consumers, which included real and legitimate commercial enterprises. By carefully following the trajectory of the explosives, I found out that a huge amount of bomb making materials were being shipped to various locations within Russia, but despite our best efforts, we could not positively identify the intended targets or specific locations.

This much was obvious. A massive terror attack was in the making. Who was orchestrating it was still a mystery.

Then it happened. What we were fearing and unhappily anticipating happened on September 9, 1999. A huge explosion destroyed a building in Russia killing hundreds of people. Four days later, a second explosion destroyed another building three miles away and killed another hundred civilians. However, one week before the first explosion in Russia, a car bomb detonated outside an apartment building housing Russian soldiers in the city of Buinaksk, which is located in Republic of Dagestan. The blast took the lives of over sixty people. It was followed six days later by a truck bomb that destroyed a nine-story building in Volgograd, a city in Rostov Oblast, killing dozens of people. I was racing against time to find the source of the attacks and positively identify the men who were orchestrating it. The media was unhelpful. I watched on television as the Russian premier blamed terrorists in Chechnya for all of the bombings and ordered a massive air campaign in the North Caucasus region. I reached out to a man who worked as a senior consultant at the Russian intelligence. He gave Pavel access to a handful of relevant classified government files, which showed how a State Duma deputy had foreknowledge about the bombings. Upon further study, I identified the State Duma deputy and interviewed him discreetly. He admitted that a GRU officer met him weeks before the Moscow bombing and told him that a series of bombing would take place in major cities of Russia. The State Duma deputy in question told me that GRU man gave details about the impending terrorist attack and even handed him the names of the participating terrorists. Pavel confirmed his story and found that several people working at the Second Central Department of the General Staff were aware of the attack yet no one took any action to prevent it.

I asked him why he didn't try to prevent the attacks, but the deputy insisted that he tried. The State Duma alerted the FSB and warned them that a terrorist attack was likely to take place. Surprisingly, the FSB officer in charge of the threat assessment department took no action to prevent the attacks or apprehend the terrorists.

It didn't make any sense that an atrocious attack would be allowed to take place without the approval of someone very powerful. Dustin later discovered that it was an inside job. A handful of FSB officers planned the attacks, and actively participated in them. However, something was amiss. I wanted to meet the FSB officers in person to confirm the State Duma deputy's story. My contact at the FSB worked at the Department for the Protection of Constitutional Order and Combating Terrorism. He confirmed to that dozens of high-ranking members of the Russian intelligence community actively participated in the terrorist attacks. Russian state security agents had evidence that the terrorist attacks in Moscow were the work of the FSB, but they were warned not to pursue this line of investigation.

I identified the senior official who had given the order to desist from the investigation. It was a man named Georgy Kaganovich. I immediately set out to locate his last known address. Naturally, that information was not listed on any official directory but Pavel had a childhood friend working at a GRU military intelligence agency's cyber unit, known as 26061. He gave us unrestricted access to government directory. I set out to Kaganovich's house for a brief reconnaissance. It was heavily guarded. I was unsurprised. But through my high-powered lenses, I recognized one of the men who was guarding the residence. It was one of the masked men who, months earlier, had been part of the team that had been desecrating my dear mother's grave in London! The thought alone made my knees tremble as my eyes flooded with tears. I didn't want to believe it had actually happened, that someone had attempted to remove my mother's remains from her final resting place in order to cause me untold pain and suffering.

The sacredness of my mother's grave was so insanely attached to my heart that I wasn't sure I could survive anything happening to the prized place. Disturbing that space was sacrilegious like nothing in the world. To me, it was the holiest place. It was an extension of my heart. A root of soul. Her graveyard was my identity. It was where the aching of my heart would soothe. I would imagine her resting in peace.

I lost my mother at a young age. And I was forcefully taken away from her.

She had been the only person who loved me.

The only person who stood against the world for me.

The person who endured insult, pain and torture for me on a daily basis. She was my heart, my soul, and my reason to be alive. Her love and her patience kept me going throughout my adolescence and teenage years.

And when the insensitive attackers tried to mar her grave, it hurt me more than if they would try to hurt her when she was alive.

I wept bitterly that day kneeling in front of God.

My defenseless mother! Was she not safe from the torture of men even *after* her death?

She was forced into prostitution at a young age. She was pregnant with me and due to an unfortunate twist of fate, she was compelled to marry the most horrible man in order to give me a future. She took humiliation and torture for me. She never stopped protecting me no matter how worse the abuse got. Finally, she gave her life for me.

I grew up without ever having the strength of defending her. I grew up watching her getting beaten for my faults. Now, after so many years, when I finally got the opportunity to pay my respects to her resting place, I felt as though I had found my soul again. Her resting place was my shrine. Each month, I would arrive religiously, and speak to her for hours, hoping somehow she would be hearing me from beyond this mutual time and space.

How painful was it to see her remains get manhandled by sick men even after her death! Did she have to suffer on my account even after she died? Would she not get peace even after dying? Was she to never get respite from callous sick torturers? My mother, my guardian angel, my reason for living- and yet I had to remove her from her home once again. It was the worst time in my life.

I was haunted by my past life, by my childhood, by my memories. I wondered what my mother thought of me. And I cried to God to protect the mother who died trying to save me- even if it hadn't been in this life, then at least after death.

When I finally returned her remains to her homeland in Russian, I couldn't stop weeping. Over and over I asked her to forgive me. She was my only protector, my only supporter and my only helper but I had failed her more times than I could count.

That day, I felt renewed pain as the day when she had died. This time, it was as though I had died along with her as I once again laid to rest my darling mother into an unmarked grave- hidden from friends and foes alike.

The area I was now surveilling threatened to flood more memories in my brain so I inhaled nosily to stay vigilant in the present and prevent myself from slipping into the memory lane.

The odds of such a man being randomly hired to guard a Russian intelligence officer was remote, especially because Dustin found out that it was Cynthia's father who had ordered the assault on my dear mother's resting place. Did that mean Richard was behind the Moscow bombings as well? I did not have concrete evidence yet but it would not be the first time Cynthia's father had tried to frame someone for crimes he committed.

I recalled the incident with Cynthia's mother years ago when he planted explosives at a location and told the NSA that she was the one responsible for trying to kill American agents. Even at that time, I was unable to exonerate her in time, but only after confronting Cynthia and broaching the truth to her about her mother prevented the old woman from being executed by US courts on treason charges.

I could not believe that state security service officers would kill hundreds of Muscovites by bombing residential buildings, so I instructed Dustin and Pavel to trace every call that was made to them months prior to the attacks. I paid a quick visit to Moscow's *Komsomolsky Prospekt*, where most intelligence officers spent their spare time, and interviewed several clerks. What I found surprised

me slightly but I was not shocked. The FSB officers who had allegedly purchased the explosives were indeed set up from months before. They each were wired random amounts in US dollars and were asked to make certain purchases and plant evidence in the house of residents of Moscow who were from Chechen origin. I found out that the entire attack was carried out for the sole purpose of framing Chechen citizens so that the attack could be used as a pretext to invade Chechnya.

Russia looked at the evidence it was offered by the American intelligence agency, or more specifically Cynthia's father and concluded that Chechnya was indeed the culprit. After Moscow concluded that Chechen rebels were to be blamed for the apartment building bombings in September 1999, it declared a blitzkrieg-style attack on the tiny nation. Within a few years, the Russian military was able to return most of Chechnya to Moscow's control.

After the first three explosions took place, I became desperate to prevent any further attacks and personally flew to Moscow to carry out ground level investigations. I reached out anonymously to the FSB headquarters and shared my finding. I also obtained a copy of Kremlin's report. By September 23, 1999, internal divisions of the FSB concluded their own investigations and had identified all the participants in the terrorist attacks in Buinaksk, Moscow, and Volgograd and confirmed that there was not a single ethnic Chechen among them. I later contacted Central Intelligence Agency's Moscow office and shared my information with them so they could track down the anonymous donor who had funded the Moscow bombings. I didn't want to publicize my report lest the Russian government began to imagine that America was at war with them.

The Moscow explosion happened nine days after the one in Buinaksk. After three days of constant traveling and searching, I discovered that the Moscow bombing was the third of what was supposed to be four apartment-building bombings in Russia over a twelve-day span that September, leaving hundreds of Russian citizens dead and the nation in panic; it was among the deadliest series of terrorist attacks in the world until September 11.

After two buildings had been bombed, Moscow police checked nearly thirty thousand apartments, including nonresidential spaces and ground floors of buildings, basements and semi-basements. They also inspected public buildings including hundreds of hotels and hostels, and over five hundred places of entertainment in Moscow. It was a losing game. There were still thousands of places that were not searched. Then, for some strange inexplicable reason, I thought about my mother's letters. In it, she mentions her mother or my maternal grandmother, who was a native of Ryazan. On a mere hunch, I alerted local police in Ryazan to conduct a massive search on residential buildings near the area my grandmother lived in. They obliged. A day later, I breathed again.

My guess was right.

The fourth bombing was scheduled to go off in Ryazan.

Fortunately, the bombing of a residential building in Ryazan failed when Moscow Police apprehended the suspects in time. However, during their arrests, the FSB members who had planned the bombings were swift to call it an exercise. But every single Russian military man knows that no exercise is ever carried out using genuine explosive devices. Furthermore, had it been an exercise, then the local police would have been alerted about an exercise. The local police assumed the attempted bombing in Ryazan was carried out by the Russian secret services, who were preparing these false flag operations to blame on the Chechen terrorists. The truth was never so simple. All the attacks on Russian cities were acts of several FSB officers who were paid or coerced by a very corrupt chief of a NSA black ops program.

Aleksei Yermakov, a former State Duma deputy who had been relentless in trying to prevent the attacks and unearth the true motive behind the bombings assured me that there was evidence that the planning of the Moscow bombings did not take place on the seventh and ninth floors of the building at number 1 Bolshaya Lubyanka Street, rather it was planned and executed by precise directions from the NSA black ops headquarters in Virginia, where Richard had undisputed authority.

November, 2000

The election month was over. The new president who had replaced Bill Clinton was nothing like the charismatic man I had worked with in the past and who helped us avert a humanitarian crisis in Serbia. Clinton was not as proactive as I had hoped him to be, but he did respond with force when Serbia violated all international laws and massacred innocent Croats and Bosnians. America's new president that moved into the White House in 2000 didn't have any criminal background either but his close relation with Richard worried me. The Bush family managed a powerful dynasty and it did not surprise me to see that Cynthia's stepfather was spending a lot of time with them in their estate. He had been personally funding the presidential campaign a year prior to the November election date. There was no doubt he would gain a lot by the outcome of the election.

I decided to weaken Richard's criminal empire, one he built using his powerful position in the U.S. government, by systematically exposing the corruption within his business. I traced his financial dealings with several large oil producing corporations. He had met

with an Iranian arms dealer months earlier and cut deals with a number of rogue Mossad agents in Lebanon. I wanted to find out what he was up to and decided to follow him. One evening, I tracked him down to the British consulate. He met with a team of executives. Most were chief shareholders of oil and gas companies, including the British petroleum. It was a secure wireless location so I could not intercept the conversation but I paid an informant to tell me what the meeting was about. It seemed that Richard and his cohorts were planning the largest attack yet on U.S. soil. Where and how the attack was to take place was unknown. I tipped off the Department of Defense and asked Cynthia to help me stop her father from harming innocent people.

As usual, Cynthia was reluctant to turn against her father. She gave me an ultimatum. If I wanted her help, I would have to show her solid proof that her stepfather was corrupt. How do you find evidence against a man who had been working in the intelligence bureau for decades? Richard expunged his records so thoroughly that even Dustin could not unearth them. I tried to break into CIA's data storage room and found paper trails of case files that Richard had solved in his early days at the Agency. His foreign contact was Ekaterina Glazova. His wife at that time. Cynthia's mother.

I knew who I had to reach out to in order to bring down Richard. The only person who knew him from his early days was Ekaterina, the former KGB agent who was sent to America during the Soviet era. She would be willing to help me because she had been a victim of Richard's manipulations herself. Cynthia was her only child and Richard banished her from the States before stealing the baby girl from her permanently. I figured Ekaterina might be interested in revenge against her ex-husband.

The meeting place was scheduled to be held in Prague. Ekaterina sent a coded message stating the time of the meeting. I was to go alone. The area was deserted when I went there. Only a gallon of clear liquid was sitting on a window pane. A taped sign read: Drink. I hesitated. A million things could go wrong. The gallon of colorless solution could be a dangerous chemical designed to incapacitate me. But I decided to take the risk. If Cynthia's mother wanted to kill me, she could have hired an assassin to shoot me. Besides, I was her only hope of bringing Richard down. I gulped down the odorless liquid and stood unsteadily. Moments later, the effects from the drugs kicked in. I dropped to my knee and fell to the ground. Then I passed out.

I came to my senses gradually. There were soft conversation going around me. Computers whined. Orders were barked. I opened my eyes. The circular room looked like an army command center. Hundreds of employees were bustling about the lined tables and consulted floor-to-ceiling maps.

"You are awake, John," a dark-haired woman appeared in front of me. "We were afraid you might have been overdosed with the sleeping potion." She spoke in a nearly flawless American accent.

"Where am I?"

The woman shook her head. "The less you know the better." She peered into my face and frowned. Was it anger in her eyes?

"You are Ekaterina Glazova?" I asked.

She ignored my question and continued watching me. When she spoke, her tone had softened. "How is my daughter?"

"Cynthia?" I wanted to clarify. "Cynthia is doing fine. She has been promoted to a senior rank at the Agency."

Cynthia's mother smiled briefly. I could see the uncanny resemblance she had with her daughter. There was so much I wanted to find out about the mysterious woman but I knew it would be unwise to ask too many questions. The former KGB operative didn't know whether she could trust me.

Ekaterina snapped her fingers. Two men appeared on her either side. She addressed me. "These two men will accompany you to our weapons depot. You will get my support. Richard is a dangerous man and I am resolved to bring him down. But first, I need something from you."

"Yes, of course. Anything."

"Take me to my daughter."

I gaped at her. "Look, I mean no disrespect, but you have been a wanted fugitive in America for twenty years. You can't just waltz in the country and meet with Cynthia. Besides, I don't know how much or what Richard has been telling her about you, but every time I brought up your subject, she gets upset. Cynthia still thinks you betrayed America and that you abandoned her."

"You want information that will bring down Richard?" Ekaterina demanded. "Well, I won't supply you with any assistance until I meet my little girl."

"Fine, fine, I will talk to her. Try to convince her to come contact you in Prague." I lowered my voice, trying to sound less aggressive. "I am telling you, if Cynthia doesn't agree to meet with you, I don't think there will be anything either one of us can do about it."

After my return to the United States, I reached out to Cynthia and tried to broach the subject of her mother. As expected, she flew into a rage and declared that she would have nothing to do with her mother.

I explained that Ekaterina was a victim of two conflicting agencies and that she was not an evil person, but Cynthia was unconvinced. She insisted her mother was a terrible woman who had committed crimes against the United States and betrayed her father to the Soviet government.

I realized this negotiation was going to be hopeless so I called Ekaterina and told her that I couldn't bring her daughter to see her. If she wanted to help me, she would have to do it without any preconditions.

Ekaterina Glazova listened quietly. She hung up without a word.

A few days later, I was at Langley to pick up Cynthia from her workplace when dozens of federal police vehicles pulled up in front of me. I was confused with the commotion and entered the CIA building to investigate. The front desk staffs confirmed that a high-profile prisoner had just surrendered to the American spy agency.

Moments later, Cynthia made her way to my car. She was in tears. "It's my mom," she told me. "She is in custody."

I didn't believe my ears. It couldn't be true. The woman was hiding in Prague. "You are talking about Ekaterina Glazova, the Cold War era Soviet spy?"

Cynthia nodded. "She was wanted by the Agency for decades and now she just surrendered to the CIA."

"Why?" I shook my head, trying to clear the confusion.

"Because of me," Cynthia said, wiping tears from her eyes.

"I don't get it."

"My mother knows she is a valuable asset to the U.S. government. She has agreed to cooperate with the Agency and share all her intel on the Russian secret services in exchange for immunity."

"Is the CIA's director going to agree?"

"He already did," Cynthia stifled another sob.

Her grief wasn't adding up so I asked her, "Why are you so upset over the plea deal?"

"My mother put in one damning condition. She said she would only speak to me. No one else. All the mission debriefings, every piece of information. She would share only with me."

"That woman was very eager to make your acquaintance," I observed. "I don't blame a mother for doing that. She took a huge risk coming out of her hiding. The U.S. government could easily decide to execute her as a spy. But she came to see you."

Cynthia whipped around to face me. "But I don't want this. She disappeared on me twenty years ago and now she has the audacity to appear from dark and mother up as though I mean something to her. I can't do this, John. Talking to her for hours every day. It is as though she planned the whole thing. Coming to America. Surrendering to the Agency. She knew I worked here and is using her position as an asset to get close to me."

I didn't speak right away. When Cynthia calmed a little, I asked her to give her mother another chance. I knew her cooperation was vital to my operation. Ekaterina would only agree to help me bring down Richard's empire if her daughter was around her. I was desperate to make it happen.

The weekly anecdotes got more interesting. Cynthia had to be present in her mother's cell every day in order to receive information about the vast network of spies that had connections with Ekaterina. The State Department envoys were complacent. They agreed to Ekaterina's demand. Cynthia would be the only person who would have contact with her. Agency official would be in the background.

As the months progressed, Ekaterina began to divulge more details about her relationship with Richard. She talked about how they met and how Richard had intentionally blown her status as an undercover agent and exposed her life to great danger. It seemed as though she was making good rapport with her daughter because I saw Cynthia storming away one evening to meet with her stepfather. Richard was taken aback with the accusations Cynthia threw at him.

Ekaterina Glazova told her daughter how Richard was the reason she had to abandon her child and escape from the United States and had been in hiding ever since. Richard looked pained and begged Cynthia not to rush into conclusion. He told her that Ekaterina was a spy and she spoke lies for a living. He also showed her evidence that proved Ekaterina Glazova had murdered numerous CIA officers during her days as a double agent.

Cynthia was furious and confronted her mother with the evidence Richard gave her. Ekaterina didn't deny all of the allegations but insisted she had acted in self-defense. And that she had never betrayed any of her American colleagues to her Soviet handler.

I remotely accessed Langley's classified archives and made a copy of the operational file on Cynthia's mother. The internal commission that was investigating her wrote in their report that her mother's real name was Ekaterina Glazova, a Cold War era super spy who ran an espionage program in the United States at the behest of the Soviet Union. The file mentioned that after Ekaterina began relationship with Richard, her Soviet handler was murdered. All evidence pointed to Ekaterina as the killer and she was being hunted by the KGB. The files were long and tedious and I found little meaningful information in them. I shared my knowledge with Cynthia and

told her to ask her mother about these murder allegations. It didn't make much sense to me why a Soviet spy would kill her own countrymen and handler. Cynthia took those files and confronted her mother. Ekaterina Glazova flew into rage and said Richard knew the answer to all these questions. Upon much cajoling, the woman admitted that she was framed for those murders. Two of her Soviet colleagues were poisoned and someone had alerted the KGB that Ekaterina was behind all three deaths. Her life became hell after that and it was only after several desperate months that another Russian intelligence agent who was a childhood friend of Ekaterina managed to find the real killer: Richard.

Meanwhile, the deputy director of the CIA was pressing Ekaterina to keep her end of the bargain and supply the Agency with the location of every safehouse in Europe that was operated by the Russian federal secret services. The former KGB spy agreed to help and gave the location of a cold war era bunker that was hidden under a Belarusian forest. The coordinates were cross examined and the Agency sent a team to confirm her intel. Richard insisted that Ekaterina was still playing the role of a double agent and her ultimate goal was to earn the trust of the Agency and carry on spying for her Motherland. Cynthia's stepfather also warned her not to meet with her mother so often because she might try to kill or harm her. When Richard heard about the bunker location which Ekaterina had provided the CIA, he declared that it was a trap, but Cynthia refused to believe him. Instead she decided to accompany the Agency's tactical team and participate in the operation herself. "If my mother is using me to attack Americans, then you can lock her up permanently," she told Richard and the CIA chiefs. "Until then, we are going to let her help us."

Richard used his Agency connection to stay in the command center as a consultant. The CIA's deputy director agreed to let Richard interfere because he had a previous connection with Ekaterina. When the team landed in Belarus, satellite images showed them moving towards the perimeter of the bunker. Cynthia was leading the way. Her mother had assured her that there were no booby traps or mines around the area. It was safe to cross.

When they were about to breach the entrance of the bunker, Richard used the satellite phone to call Cynthia and asked her to pull back for a moment while he ran another security check over the compound. He instructed the CIA's technical operative to use a NASA satellite that was fitted with thermal infrared sensor and scan the area around the Belarusian forest. The technocrat complied. Then he gasped. Due to high surface temperature, the thermal infrared wavelengths glowed in the resulting image. The entire bunker was packed with tons of explosives.

Richard grabbed the phone and called Cynthia. He told her to get away from the bunker as fast as she could. Cynthia began a hasty retreat and ordered the team to follow her. Just then, a deafening explosion was heard, following by blinding flash of fire. GPS satellites lost visual for several minutes. Then Cynthia's voice could be heard. She was all right but two of the team members were too close to the explosion and died instantly. The Agency deputy director ordered Cynthia to return to the States and sent a team of U.S. Marshalls to escort Ekaterina to the super-max in California to be tried for the murder of sixteen Agency officers, including the death of the two men who were killed in the bunker explosion in Belarus. The CIA scrapped the immunity deal they had previously made with Ekaterina Glazova and charged her with seventy-three counts of espionage. The DOJ announced that the Russian spy would be executed if found guilty. Richard convinced them that Cynthia's mother had wanted to kill her along with the entire tactical team by first earning her trust and giving them false information about the bunker. She must have known about the bombs but purposefully neglected to mention it.

Cynthia returned to Langley in tears. She could not fathom why her mother had tried to kill her. I wanted to comfort her but did not know what to say. Richard was busy preparing a case against Ekaterina and hired a renowned prosecutor to indict his ex-wife. His enthusiasm bothered me. I had no doubt that Ekaterina was guilty but I still wanted to be sure, so I spoke to an old contact who worked in the U.S. Marshall's office and asked him to give me five minutes alone with Cynthia's mother. He agreed. I stood for a long time outside the cell of the frail ageing woman. She looked despondent.

"Why did you do it?" I asked finally.

Ekaterina Glazova looked up. Her face registered surprise. "Why am I being here? I agreed to speak only to my daughter."

"Well, that is not going to happen," I told her, "considering you tried to have her killed yesterday."

"What?" Ekaterina exclaimed. "Is Cynthia all right?"

"She is, no thanks to you. Why didn't you tell the CIA that you were sending them to a death trap?"

"The bunker in Belarus?" The KGB spy whispered. "There was never any explosive in that area. What happened?"

"What happened was that the team Cynthia led into the forest, trusting the information you supplied her with, almost got them killed. If it wasn't for Richard, who had enough sense to run a thermal scan over the area and noticed the heat sensors flaring up due to the explosives, Cynthia would have been scattered to pieces."

The Soviet spy gasped. "Thank god Cynthia is okay. I never knew about any explosives. There was no bomb in the bunker. Someone must have planted it."

"Do you have any idea who it might have been?"

“*Nyet!*” Ekaterina replied hoarsely. Her eyes were wild. “I only want Cynthia to be safe. Please. Protect her.”

I nodded and left the federal penitentiary in a hurry. Something about what the woman said made sense. She really had no idea her daughter was nearly killed. It didn't seem like a cold blatant lie. If Ekaterina Glazova spoke the truth, then someone else must have planted the explosives around the bunker in order to discredit her intel and cause the CIA to cancel her immunity so she could be tried for murder and espionage and be executed. I had a distinct idea who that might be so I tracked the GPS on Richard's cell phone. I asked Dustin to pinpoint every stop he made for the past seven days. Two days after Cynthia announced that she would lead the team and go to Belarus in order to follow up on her mother's intel, Richard drove downtown and met with a Latvian arms dealer who had several operational bases in Rēzekne. I tracked down the criminal's whereabouts and found out that he was former member of the *Dolgoprudnenskaya* Bratva who ran organized crime rings inside Belarus. The man was uncooperative at first but I threatened to shut down his entire operation if he did not cooperate. He admitted to meeting Richard a few days earlier. Cynthia's stepfather paid him fifty-thousand dollars in cash in exchange for a simple job. All he had to do was contact his gang members who were based in Minsk and order them to plant high-grade explosives around a Cold War era bunker. That was all he knew.

It was from Ekaterina Glazova that I learned about how she and Richard met and got married. The Russian spy told me about the time she was on the run from her own employers. Her handler had been murdered in Prague and two other KGB agents were poisoned in Moscow. All three deaths were pinned on Ekaterina. It was before Cynthia was born. And Richard and Ekaterina's relationship was blossoming. Unable to return to her motherland, she remained in the United States. Richard used his credentials to secure her freedom from American intelligence agencies and offered her refuge in his own home. Ekaterina was grateful to the Austrian-Hungarian man for sheltering her in a time of dire need. Several months later, a former colleague in the KGB made contact with Ekaterina. He came to tell her that the Russian spy agency was no longer considering her to be the murder suspect of the three dead spies. They did not think she killed her handler. Ekaterina was naturally relieved and agreed to meet with the Russian investigator. He handed her undisputed evidence which showed that Richard had been in Moscow when the two men were killed. They also found evidence that Ekaterina's handler was killed by a man whose description matched Richard's but they also found DNA traces of Ekaterina in the vicinity, proving that someone must have planted it there to frame her. Ekaterina was devastated to learn about Richard's betrayal. He not only lied to her, but put her life and reputation in danger by murdering three of her colleagues and framed her for it.

Richard was capable of mass murder! My mind felt numb with the realization. I knew I had to warn Cynthia but was afraid she would not believe me. Ekaterina Glazova was going to be sacrificed because Richard decided to frame her for the murder of two CIA field operatives. He also convinced Cynthia that her mother wanted her dead. I knew it was far from the truth. The woman may have been a Russian spy but I could tell that she sincerely loved her daughter and was a fiercely protective mother. She did not deserve to be executed for a crime she did not commit.

I decided to act alone and gathered audio recording of my conversation with the *Dolgoprudnenskaya* Bratva member. I sent a copy to the DOD and the CIA. I told them it was Richard who had planted the bombs that killed two of their men, Ekaterina was innocent and so her immunity should be restored. My pleas fell into deaf ears. The CIA's deputy director brushed off any discussion about an immunity and insisted they try Cynthia for the previous crimes she was accused of. As for Richard, the FBI declared him to be a domestic terrorist for planting explosives that were about to kill dozens of American agents, so they placed a warrant for his arrest. However, as an American national, he was not facing the death penalty like his ex-wife. But he was still at large, having escaped the day his arrest warrant was signed. Someone inside the NSA must have alerted him.

I returned home, miserable with failure. Nothing worked out the way I had wanted it to. Ekaterina Glazova should be free. Richard should have been behind bars. When I entered my apartment, the lights were on. Cynthia was sitting in my living room. Her face burned in fury. She asked me if I was the one who tipped off the Defense Department about Richard's involvement in organized crime. I tried to calm her and explain how it was Richard who paid a mob boss to plant the explosives in the bunker. It could have gotten Cynthia killed but he still took the risk only because he wanted Cynthia to hate her mother. He wanted everyone to know that Ekaterina Glazova would murder her own daughter. Cynthia was still angry with me for ruining her father's life, but she left my place without arguing further.

Meanwhile, the Department of Justice decided to proceed with Ekaterina's execution. Cynthia's mother had only three days to live. I did not want Cynthia to lose her mother because it was something I never had, so I reached out to several FSB officers who I knew were acquainted with Ekaterina. Two of the men responded to my messages and when I told them their KGB colleague was to be put to death, they promised to arrange a rescue mission. I did not want to know what they had planned but I hoped those FSB men would be able to prevent Cynthia's mother from being killed for a crime she did not commit.

A week later, I received a panicked call from Cynthia. There was bad news. Ekaterina Glazova, the famed Soviet spy had escaped from the super-max prison. There was a national manhunt for the woman but she seemed to have vanished without a trace. The next day, Cynthia was at my apartment, knocking urgently at my door. She told me her life was in danger. The night before, two masked men

broke in to her house and fired multiple rounds at her. Although they missed the intended target, she panicked and came over. I drove over to see her place and found that the shooting was haphazard, as though the marksman had intentionally missed. I pushed the paranoid idea from my head until the next attempt on Cynthia's life became known to me. She was crossing the road when an SUV nearly ran over her, hitting her knee cap. She survived by a stroke of luck. Cynthia had memorized the plate numbers. It belonged to a former KGB agent who had been living in the United States for ten years. He was also a known associate of Ekaterina Glazova.

On the final days of Spring, Cynthia received a call from the deputy director of the CIA who asked her to investigate a case of chemical poisoning at a testing facility in eastern Ukraine. Cynthia informed me of her plans to travel abroad but I felt reluctant to let her go alone. I loved Cynthia and wanted to keep her safe. If there were people trying to assassinate her, then Ukraine could become a hot spot for it. I insisted on accompanying her. The medical testing lab was located in the city center of Luhansk. Fifty-seven unexplained cases of blood poisoning were reported in that area and the authorities were overwhelmed by the extent of the crisis. The Agency stipulated that our mission was to extract blood samples from the patients to ascertain what sort of poison or chemical was used on them. Cynthia and I arrived at the laboratory and scanned the building. There seemed to be no visible threats on the inside. I opted to keep watch on the three exits to ensure no untoward guests showed up and sent Cynthia to retrieve a sample of blood from several random patients. It should have been a clean operation so I saw no need to accompany her. Cynthia entered the ward on the first floor and grabbed several glass syringes. She headed to the adult bacteriological incubators and began to collect blood samples from the patients who had been kept in induced coma.

I stood at the doorway, keeping my weapon concealed under the white lab coat. Cynthia slipped her hand through the portholes that was fitted with long rubber gloves and proceeded to insert the needle into a middle-aged woman.

A sudden shriek made me jump. Cynthia screamed. Her hands were stuck inside the incubator. I ran to her and glanced inside. The patient had awakened and grabbed Cynthia's hand. "Ekaterina!" was the word the patient gasped over and over again.

Cynthia trembled and leaned closer to the glass. "Why are you calling me my mom's name?" She demanded.

The patient glared at Cynthia from behind the glass-walled box and repeated, "Ekaterina, why did you do this to me?"

The patient's vice-like grip on Cynthia's arm immobilized her. I tugged Cynthia to get her away from the incubator but it seemed hopeless. I ran back to the medicine closet and filled a syringe with sedative. Using a porthole, I inserted the solution into the hysterical patient. The grip finally loosened and Cynthia was free.

When we returned from Ukraine and submitted the samples to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, they reported that the patients had been infected with nerve agents, but they would need weeks to positively identify the chemicals that were in their bodies.

Meanwhile, Cynthia's stepfather was still on the run from the authorities but he managed to reach out to her and asked her to be very careful. Richard convinced Cynthia that her mother was a psychopath who had escaped the federal penitentiary in order to kill her. He also said that his sources at the CIA and NSA informed him that Ekaterina Glazova used the laboratory in Luhansk to test illegal chemicals and bioweapons on unsuspecting civilians. Cynthia told him about the bizarre encounter she faced in the lab where one of the patients mistook her for her mother. Richard was relieved and assured her that her uncanny resemblance to her mother made those victims think that it was she who had poisoned them. Cynthia believed him unquestionably and became convinced that her mother was a monster who tested dangerous chemicals on innocent civilians.

There was an APB out for Richard but he refused to surrender to the police because he felt he needed to protect Cynthia from her mother. He said he had tried to stop Ekaterina but it was impossible because the former Soviet double agent had an open contract on Cynthia. As long as Ekaterina Glazova was alive, Cynthia would never be safe. Richard told Cynthia the only way she could save herself was to kill her mother before she succeeds in the assassination plan.

Somehow, everything Richard claimed sounded absurd to me. He had already proved himself to be untrustworthy when he planted explosives in the Belarusian bunker in order to frame his ex-wife. I didn't believe Cynthia's mother was trying to kill her. Cynthia didn't agree with me. She was geared up to stop her mother.

I tracked down two of Ekaterina's former KGB colleagues in London and told them who I was and what predicament the former spy was in. They knew her well and claimed Ekaterina Glazova was an honorable woman who never killed any American agent. Her mission in the United States had been merely to be an observer and collect data from the Central Intelligence Agency. Ekaterina's colleagues were convinced she had been framed by her former husband- Cynthia's stepfather -and gave me several files that contained evidence against Richard. There was photographic evidence of Richard entering the building where Ekaterina's handler was killed. It seemed he had framed her for numerous murders in order to make the US government execute her as a spy.

I gathered the evidence that was likely to exonerate Cynthia's mother and personally mailed the files to Cynthia. I asked her to give her mother another chance because she was likely an innocent woman. Cynthia agreed to take the evidence to her father to confirm its authenticity.

Two hours later, Cynthia called me; her voice distraught with exasperation. She told me to come to her house at once. I was confused at the urgency but obliged. Half an hour later, I was at her door step. Cynthia saw me and led me into the sitting room.

A video was playing on the monitor of her main computer. It looked like a video of her mother. She urged me to watch the clip in its entirety.

I gazed at the ten minutes video recording. It showed Ekaterina Glazova seated in a studio, speaking directly into the camera. She was slightly tearful as she admitted to doing terrible things in life. She admitted to executing five American intelligence officers and betraying three Soviet operatives in New York. For the final two minutes, Cynthia's mother admits to having me kidnapped for two years because she wanted to brainwash me and experiment illegal drugs on me. She also detailed the surgeries I had undergone while in captivity, claiming it was all done under her strict authorization.

The news was too explosive for me. I had just begun to believe that Cynthia's mother was innocent but now the confession tape contradicted everything I had fought for. My mind rolled back to a decade ago when I was being tortured and brainwashed by masked surgeons who had carved me out like a guinea pig. It was shocking to see that Ekaterina Glazova was behind my two-year captivity and subsequent memory loss.

I was curious to know how Cynthia came into possession of such a vital piece of evidence. She told me her father had handed her the video, to prove to her how evil her mother really was. Richard had insisted that Ekaterina was an evil woman who was not worth saving.

"I don't know, Cynthia, but don't you think we should confront your mother about this?" I made this suggestion casually once the video ended.

"Confront that monster?" Cynthia has hissed. "John, she killed American agents. She is a murderer. You heard her yourself."

"I know that, but I also know your mother is a smart woman. Why would she leave such evidence behind- a confession tape for all to see? KGB operatives are a lot better than that."

"Maybe she had a momentary guilty conscience," Cynthia said. "I don't care why she made the video, John, but now that I know she is guilty, I want her to pay. My mother deserves the death penalty for committing treason and taking the lives of American operatives."

"If she was really guilty." I said tightly.

"John, she kidnapped you. Took you away from me. And tortured you for two years. She admitted to all that! I will never forgive her for hurting you so much!" Cynthia was almost shouting.

"Hey, Cynthia. Look, I don't know for sure if she was behind my abduction, but even if she did, I don't care really. It was all in the past. We are together now."

"I'm not letting her get away with this."

"Cynthia, she is still your mother." I tried to reason with her. "Even if she did terrible things, we should give her a chance to explain."

"I will never speak to her again," Cynthia snapped. "And I never want to see my mother unless she is strapped on the gurney inside the death chamber."

I didn't argue with Cynthia after that and took the video with me. There was something I wanted to verify before passing judgment on the former KGB spy.

When I heard that the evidence had come from none other than the man who had tried to frame the Soviet spy in the first place, I wanted to verify the video's authenticity before forging any definite conclusions about the case.

I paid a visit to an FBI facial expression expert I had associated with previously.

"I remember you," the man exclaimed, when he saw me in his waiting room. "John, isn't it? Never mind, I already knew it wasn't your real name."

"Wait. How exactly did you know?"

"In case you've forgotten, I have been a BAU profiler for twenty years. I know when someone is lying." Calvin Pilato waved me into his office.

I followed close behind. "I hope to use your unique skills for something else today. It's important."

"What is it?"

"A woman's life is on the line. She is on death row, set to be executed for crimes she admitted to herself. In this video."

"Why come to me?" Calvin slanted his head. "Generally, confession tapes are not works of fiction. People do speak the truth in those."

"I know, but there was something about it I couldn't explain. Call it gut feeling. Now, I am no expert like you, Calvin, but maybe you would see something in it that I have missed."

I played thirty seconds of Ekaterina Glazova's confession tape for the behavioral analyst.

"What do you think of that?" I inquired.

"Voice analyzer is showing the stress level is high."

"She was being coerced?" I asked.

"Likely. Yes, you hear the pitch on the last word of the sentence. That's not how normal people talk. That lady definitely had a gun to her head. How much data do I need to analyze?"

"It's just a ten-minute video," I offered. "I need to verify if the person speaking is telling the truth."

"You think it's a lie?"

"I don't believe some of the things mentioned, that's all."

The facial expression expert laughed dryly. "Right. I can't blame you for not believing in word too much. Did you know that average person tells three lies in every ten minutes of conversation?"

"What? No." I opposed. "I know some honest people who never lie."

"Sure, I didn't say everybody. Just statistically speaking. So, let's see what this mystery woman is really trying to say."

I replayed the tape, pausing it several times while the BAU profiler took notes.

"Uh, this is the only part you got?" Calvin nervously scratched his temple with his finger.

"Yes, just these ten minutes. Why?"

"The woman was probably being held hostage. Her stress levels are sky high and she is definitely lying. But I am interested in the eyebrows. They shoot up, and then the jaw drops. The woman is super surprised to hear herself. She has no idea the things she is claiming responsibility for actually happened."

"So, does that mean she didn't do any of those things she is claiming responsibility for?" I asked.

"That is the logical conclusion." The expert frowned. "Would help if I could meet her in person- you know, to establish a baseline for her micro expressions."

"If bringing her in here is not possible, what else can you tell me about this video?"

"Do you see how she moves when discussing the kidnapping of this guy? She gives a classic one-sided shrug."

I leaned closer to the screen. "What does that usually mean?"

"Genuine bewilderment. She has no idea what kidnapping she is talking about. And when the woman claimed to be responsible for the murder of American operatives, again her body contradicts the words."

"How?"

"She claims to be guilty but her twitching of the right eye- well, it is saying the opposite." The facial expression expert leaned back on his chair.

"She lied about being guilty?"

"Yes." He said simply.

"How can you tell if it a real emotion or an act?"

"Real emotions can't be faked, John. Her eye movement lasted less than a second. Meaning it wasn't intentional. In behavior analysis, we call these micro expressions. If it lasted more than a second, I would say she was not lying about being guilty."

"And what about her mouth?" I pointed to the screen. "The woman raised the corner of her lips. Momentarily."

"Shame, anger and contempt." Calvin explained. "Contempt is presumably for the person who is forcing her to say these things."

I cleared my throat and addressed the expert. "I should have told you this- the woman is a Russian national. Could nationality have anything to do with specific facial expressions or gestures?"

Calvin shook his head. "Nope. These expressions are universal. Fear is written on all her face. There is no doubt about it."

"You don't think these micro expressions vary depending on the person's nationality?"

"I've spent my life studying faces. I know almost everything about the forty-three muscles that combine to produce over of ten thousand expressions."

"Wow. To me, it looks like a normal person talking."

Calvin paused the video. "I don't know whether you noticed her shoulders falling back when she says she betrayed her Soviet handlers. It was a gestural retreat.

What does it mean?

"It means she doesn't believe a word she just said."

"In other words, Ekaterina didn't betray her handlers." I muttered under my breath. "Someone else did."

"Likely. My professional opinion is that everything she was saying on this video is false."

I held on to the video tape and contacted Cynthia. When she heard about the assessment the behavioral analyst had come up with, she was unconvinced and insisted her mother was guilty. Cynthia told me she volunteered to be part of the FBI's manhunt team to find her mother. Cynthia wanted to capture Ekaterina and hand her over to the DOJ so they could carry out the Russian spy's sentence.

However, three months after Ekaterina escaped from the federal prison, she hadn't been found despite a national manhunt. And the killers kept coming after Cynthia. I found it abnormal that trained hitmen would have so much difficulty in scoring a single shot. It was as though whoever was ordering the assassinations *wanted* Cynthia to survive. The murder attempts were likely a farce to make Cynthia believe her mother was a criminal.

On March of 1999, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe received a direct order from the Secretary General of NATO to initiate air operations over the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Allied commander who executed the order was none other than General Stanley of the U.S. Armed forces. In the ensuing weeks, thousands of NATO bombs pummeled the Serbian cities, causing great infrastructural damages and loss of lives.

Dustin was reminding me of the historical events when his tone become more purposeful "A Cypriot shell firm funneled two million dollars to the account of Draco Tešić, a Bosnian Serb army captain who had fought actively against the NATO forces in 1999. He was seen in the company of a notorious Serbian weapons dealer."

"So?" I was only half listening.

"The arms broker was arrested by TSA and confessed to selling a chemical bomb to Tešić who swore to use it to make the American general who was responsible for the attack on his family pay."

"Dustin, I need you to find everything you can about the Serbian captain's family?"

"He has none," the hacker said.

"What do you mean?"

"His wife and seven-year-old daughter died in NATO bombings during the 1999 air invasion."

"Who was in charge of the NATO command?"

"General Stanley."

"Okay, his life may be in danger. Dustin, can you locate where the general is right now?"

"Um, he's actually pretty safe."

"What do you mean?"

"General Stanley is meeting with the VP right now. He is at the White House."

"Yet, our arms dealer said the dirty bomb was being shipped to Manhattan. Why would Captain Tešić want to bomb New York when his target is in Washington?" I thought aloud.

"Wait, I ran another search," Dustin said sharply. "General Stanley has a daughter who studies at a private school on fifth avenue."

"Get the principal of the school on phone now," I shouted. "Tell them there is a bomb threat, and they need to evacuate the children from the school premises."

"I think we may be too late," Dustin said. "Two hours ago, the school guards listed a delivery of pasta arriving. Delivery men took it directly to the basement of the school, near the cafeteria. I checked with the delivery company. The school never ordered pasta."

"It was the bomb," I breathed. Fear crept up to my cheeks as I considered how many children would die if the chemical bomb detonated. "This was about revenge. Tešić's daughter died in the NATO bombings and now he blames General Stanley for his family's death. He wants revenge, wants Stanley to feel the pain he is feeling by watching his daughter die. Dustin, did you alert the FBI?"

The Russian hacker nodded. "Bomb squad is already on the way."

"Good, tell them to hurry. And drop a jamming signal over the area," I ordered him. "If the Serbian captain figures out we discovered his precious bomb, he may try to detonate remotely."

"I wonder why haven't the bomb exploded yet," Dustin wondered. "They set it two hours ago."

I glanced at my watch. It was ten in the morning. "It's probably set to detonate during lunch time. You did say bomb was set near the school cafeteria, right?"

The hacker nodded.

"Let me speak to the principal," I said.

When the principal of the school answered the phone, I asked her to make the children paly outside until after lunchtime and under no circumstance, should they let the children return to the school building. She agreed.

I could finally breathe again, knowing the children would be safe.

June, 2004

I was still disturbed by the episode in Ukraine. If Ekaterina hadn't poisoned those patients, then who had? How did they know who was behind it? I decided to fly back to Ukraine and search for the answers. This time, I went alone.

I got on a solo flight to Moscow from where a connecting flight took me to Ukraine. As I flew over the familiar rocky terrain, my memories began to return. I peered out the plane window, trying to identify the location of the Camp in which I was first trained to become a world-class spy. The Colonel. The Camp. Mikhail and the recruits. The still images of my marred past flashed in my brain.

The Camp offered me a new life, but it was a bleak one; devoid of freedom and sovereignty. The recruits had no privilege to venture outside. We lived like trapped animals, obeying the whims of an overbearing Colonel. My recruiter Mikhail was the only person who understood me. I was a wild-eyed teenager, with frantic blue eyes and flaxen hair. The recruits called me mad, but they did not understand that I was merely frightened of being trapped or abandoned again.

I was only nervous because the idea of being enslaved again made me very frightened. Once I had fled from under the roof of my abusive father, I never wanted to return to the place again. I wanted to be free. But being in the training Camp felt like being enslaved or imprisoned. My performance was poor at first. I resented obeying orders. During duels, I had to engage in hand-to-hand combat, but it reminded me of my father who would beat my mother, so I often refused to fight. When they forced me to practice, I would feel myself drifting back to my childhood, where I imagined he was beating me again.

I feared that the Camp would train me into becoming like my father, and this idea made me lose my cool. I was insane. I would sometimes continue hitting my opponent long after he signaled time-out. Several times, I beat up my duel partner so savagely that he had to end up staying overnight at the infirmary. I thought I was going to be punished for my action but Mikhail would laugh at my antics and order me to get my anger off on the boxing bags and not to beat the recruits to death. It was in the days when I was drowning in despair, brutality and abjectness that Mikhail's support saved me from total degeneration.

I suddenly felt my throat constrict. I was back at the camp, clad in full combat gear and tactical outfit, accompanied by sixty elite members of approximately seven spy agencies. They had one objective: to storm the Camp and capture or liquidate all personnel.

For three years, I collaborated with senior NSA officials who in turn partnered with the broader Russian intelligence and worked together to bring down the former KGB Colonel who was running unsanctioned operations in Russia, Europe and Americas. It was not an easy task to gain the trust of the American intelligence agencies. More often than not, I would be expelled from critical briefing rooms. My Russian background seemed to them to be the original sin. Many junior CIA officers felt that I could not be trusted. I witnessed the most pervasive and pernicious form of American Russophobia propagated by the political leaders that were contextualized in false flag operations and were fed to the intelligence agencies. But I swallowed the insult and carried on narrowing down the rogue operating center of my former employer.

The Colonel had done terrible things and was responsible for the deaths of several of my dear friends and I wanted to bring down his division and make him answer for those crimes but I also wanted to rescue Mikhail and the other unsuspecting recruits and save them from persecution. I knew Mikhail had always abhorred the criminal activities of the Colonel so I hoped to bring him to America and offer him a chance to start again. But my plans became skewed. I was unable to save the one person I had so desperately hoped to rescue.

Prior to the operation, I fought tooth and nail to prevent the Operation Whiteout from taking place. It was a contingency plan the government had in place. If recapturing the compound proved too risky, they wanted to initiate the procedure to erase the evidence that such unsanctioned camps existed at all. The plan consisted of funneling a tanker of VX gas into the Camp's ventilation system. Within five minutes, the chemical warfare agent would have turned my former training center into a mass grave. I could not allow that and fearing I may be overruled, I withheld vital tactical information they required to launch their strike. I lobbied for a physical strike unit to breach the perimeter and rescue the recruits and capture the Colonel. My bosses begrudgingly agreed and the mission proceeded as planned.

I knew my trainer Mikhail would be inside the compound so I personally joined the tactical unit to look for him, eager to rescue him before the men killed or captured him. I headed to the east wing where I knew his office had been. Mikhail was nowhere to be found. I then heard rapid bursts of gunfire coming from the direction of the Colonel's operations center. There was a secret exit behind the conference room so I suspected that the Colonel might be using that space to escape. I headed to the room only to find the area scattered in debris. Heavy firefight had ensued moments earlier and the tactical team announced that they had neutralized the target.

The Colonel? Dead? I couldn't believe it. I had to see with my own eyes. I ran inside the operation center and searched for the old colonel's body but he was not there. A guttural sound caught my attention. I whipped around and saw a figure lying prone behind a metal desk. I hurried over.

The man was alive! I turned him over and studied the dusty streaked face. The man's eyes flickered. The glittering blue eyes widened. It was Mikhail.

The memories of the fateful day were returning.

"Misha," I implored, using the Russian diminutive of the name Mikhail. "Please, don't die."

I held my former training instructor in my arms. His face was bloodied and whenever he opened his mouth, fresh blood spilled over the side of his mouth, choking him. I raised his head to help him breathe. His pitiful state reduced me to tears. Mikhail's skull was broken in two places where high-velocity bullets had torn through. His hard features were distorted, cheeks cracked and chin splintered. He was breathing heavily, as though running out of air. I held him closer, insanely hoping it would somehow prolong life and keep the inevitable death at bay. Mikhail's blood gushed from his wounds, soaking into my combat uniform. His face was getting blurry. Frustrated, I realized that my tears had clouded my vision, nearly blinding me. I kept calling him, telling him I was right here, promising help which would never arrive in time.

Then I heard the awful sound. Almost a death gasp. I didn't want to believe it. Mikhail, the strongest man I knew, someone who rescued me from the dark hole of the death chamber and gave me a new life, who stood by me when I was the most vulnerable, he couldn't just die. But when I looked at the sightless eyes, I couldn't control myself any more. I started sobbing. I had not intended to weep so profusely but the tears were stubborn and wouldn't cease. Like a flood, my miseries poured and I cried over the dead body of my instructor.

My sorrow quickly transformed into a kind of righteous rage. Mikhail was a good man. He did not deserve to die in such a brutal manner. He should never have been here. The Colonel should have died- not him!

But I realized what Mikhail had done. He knew the Colonel was the chief target so he took the colonel's place and gave cover fire, allowing him to escape. I was not too surprised. Mikhail once told me how the KGB colonel had saved his life- and for that he owed him. It seemed that the man was repaying the debt. For many years, Mikhail took similar life risks for me and protected me from the colonel's wrath. The Colonel had saved his life once. Mikhail was an honorable man and returned the favor.

I shook my head to clear away those memories.

The plane was descending rapidly. I had arrived in Ukraine. My first stop was at the medical testing facility. I studied the security logs and scanned the name of every visitor for the weeks prior to our visit. I noticed that an ambulance had escorted each patient to the hospital. The driver's name was Yulia Olha. I tracked down her address and searched her home. I discovered a secret compartment behind her kitchen sink and found a fire-proof safe box. It took me a little over half hour to unlock it. Inside, there were three vials of clear liquid. I secured the solution and replaced the cover. With drawn weapon, I waited for the woman to return.

When Yulia Olha arrived, she did not look too surprised to see me, but as she stepped near, I saw her reaching into a small side purse. It contained a gun. I seized it from her before she was able to load it and asked her specific questions. She was uncooperative at first but I later decided to bluff and told her that I knew exactly who poisoned those fifty patients at the medical laboratory in Luhansk. I added that the police have copies of her DNA and fingerprint and were on the way to arrest her- unless she told me the truth- in which case, I might let her escape.

Yulia looked resigned and began to talk. What she told me sent my mind reeling in shock. The Ukrainian ambulance driver talked about receiving a message in her phone that had a bank account number. She logged in to the account and found one million hryvnia in the account. The anonymous message promised her double that amount if she carried out a specific operation. All she had to do was to pick up a dozen of glass vials from a drop point and inject several patients with it. But the instructions were explicit. The patients had to be awake and must be able to see her face clearly while she is injecting them.

"Why did your employer demand that the patients needed to see the face of the person infecting them?"

Yulia sighed in despair. "He said-"

"He?" I repeated. "How do you know it was a man who messaged you?"

"Because on the day of the job, I received a phone call. His voice was garbled but I knew it was male. He said it was important that I showed my face to the victims before injecting them or else my payment would be canceled."

Such an odd request! I peered into Yulia's lined face and tried to discern the mystery behind the blackmailer's strange demand. He may have wanted to frame her, but there were other ways to go about it.

I looked back at Yulia. Of course! She had looked so familiar to me that I was being unable to identify those features. She looked nearly identical to Ekaterina Glazova, Cynthia's mother who had been accused of poisoning those patients. Everything made more sense now. Richard's desperation to prove to Cynthia that her mother was evil. I ordered Yulia to hand over her phone so I could take it back to America and have Dustin trace the origin of the call that was made to the poor woman- inwardly, I felt dejected. Little did this woman know that her striking similarity to Ekaterina made her a target in a dangerous scheme.

Upon my return, Dustin was waiting for me in his computer lab.

"Do you know anyone by the name of Arndt Kesselring?" The hacker asked.

"Arndt?" I repeated, trying to recall where I met the man. "Yes, we crossed paths, during transit. He had defected from East Germany during the 80s. I saw him three years after the reunification Germany. I was there to meet a friend who helped me out once."

"He sent a communiqué via my open channel- it is marked for your eyes only," Dustin said.

"Meaning?"

"You'll have to do a virtual retinal scan before the message is readable. Or hearable."

I knelt before the monitor. "Okay, let's get over with it."

Dustin scrolled through the coded message. "The note said the audio recording concerns a Hansjörg Güllich."

"I've never heard of him."

"I did a background check." Dustin offered. "Güllich was the commander of stealth operations at BND."

"Is the message transcribed?"

"No, it's being relayed right now. Hope you understand German as much as you speak it. Put the headset on."

There was a brief moment of statistic. Then a recording of a conversation began to play in the background. The voices were muffled, as though it was recorded outdoors.

"What are doing in the roof top of this building, Reinhard?" A cold voice was asking.

When I heard the reply, I froze. "There are some private matters we need to discuss." It was Richard's voice.

What was Cynthia's father doing in Germany?

"Ja, what is it?"

"My dear Hans," Richard was saying, "your inquiries into my extracurricular business activities are abominable."

"What do you mean?" The BND commander said sharply.

"You have requested a meeting with the director of the CIA? I'm curious as to why you felt the need."

"It does not concern you, Reinhard." The man responded icily.

Richard let out a mirthless laugh. "I hope, Hans, you are not considering sharing information about our past."

"Our past is no secret," Hansjörg Güllich answered. "The Americans are aware we have collaborated with Stasi. It was a necessary evil to end Communism."

"I agree," Richard said, with mock cheerfulness. "Perhaps we could continue doing business in the future."

Güllich offered only frosty silence.

"Aha, shall we go inside?" Richard was saying in a cordial tone. "The wind is getting sharp and my daughter expects me to be back in the next flight."

The BND commander repeated. "Your daughter?"

"Yes, yes, you remember my Cynthia?"

Hansjörg Güllich replied after a long moment. "I remember her mother well."

"Well, Cynthia doesn't have too many memories from her childhood," Richard said excitedly. "As far as she will know, her mother Ekaterina failed her miserably."

"Reinhard, you haven't told her the truth?"

"Truth is unnecessary when all Cynthia needs to know is that I love her."

"So, she doesn't know?" Hansjörg Güllich pressed.

There was a tense silence.

The BND stealth operations commander repeated, "Cynthia doesn't know what you did to her?" His voice became harsh. "And her mother? About the labs? The children via IVF? Your experiments?"

Finally, Richard spoke. "Cynthia will never find out, Hans."

"Children grow up, and they eventually find everything out. They deserve to know."

"May I say something, dear Hansjörg?" Richard said, speaking very slowly. "I have sincere intentions to speak generously about your honor and integrity."

"Speak about me?" The German intelligence agency chief sounded alarmed. "What do you mean, Reinhard?"

"I promise to make your death sound heroic." Richard said softly.

"You are insane," Güllich shouted.

"No, I am a man of my word," Richard replied. "Your suicide will be registered by police tomorrow morning. They will wonder why a man of your stature would leap off the roof of his own office building, ja? Well, I will leave a concise suicide note explaining why you thought taking your own life would be the best for Germany."

"I am leaving n-"

The words were cut short, and I heard a yell. The recording ended moments later.

I removed my heavy headphones and sank to the ground.

It was impossible! How could Richard have killed his BND colleague in cold blood. It was the most pernicious premeditated murder I have even witnessed, in this case, heard.

My concern for Cynthia's wellbeing now transcended to her mother. Ekaterina was still missing. Law enforcement authorities had no leads on her whereabouts. Not a single sighting in weeks. U.S. border patrol agents confirmed that the former KGB spy had not left the country. I wondered how a fugitive would manage to survive in American cities without documents, money or safe place of residence. It struck me as odd that a woman who had very few contacts in the United States would be able to successfully pull off a jail break and stay on the run by evading six different agencies for months.

Cynthia was however convinced that her mother was hiding somewhere in America and would inevitably be captured. I was less sure. My heart believed that Ekaterina loved her daughter and if she was voluntarily on the run from the authorities, she would have found some way to make contact with Cynthia. I feared the worst- that the former KGB agent was dead.

This thought was not comforting and I had no desire to share my fear with Cynthia. Instead, I remained busy by focusing my energy on locating Richard. Cynthia's stepfather was also a fugitive, but he had made contact with Cynthia to hand her evidence proving her mother's guilt. I decided to follow his trail and find out what he has been up to.

My friend Dustin assisted in finding the last location Richard had visited. After three weeks of scanning surveillance footages, satellite imagery narrowed the Richard's possible destination to a pub near Miles City, Montana.

I had to check the location for myself so I took a domestic flight to Missoula airport and drove to Custer County. I showed Richard's photo to the bartender in Miles City pub but he denied ever seeing anyone matching those description. I was certain Dustin's photo was not mistaken and Richard had been here, which meant that the bartender was intentionally lying. I showed the picture to several other diners as well but they claimed never to have seen the man in the photo. Disheartened, I began to drive around the county, hoping to find a clue that would help me locate Richard.

I arrived at an abandoned brick house, thirteen miles south of the Kinsey road. The terrain was rough so I phoned Dustin and asked him to re-task a satellite over the area and scan it for suspicious movements or cluster of vehicles. The Russian hacker got back to me within an hour. He had identified a small clearing between several rocky hills. Two armored trucks were parked nearby.

I suspected this might be the place where Richard was hiding, so I drove near the area and hid my SUV behind a bush.

I searched the area on foot, using a portable magnetic locator to identify traps or buried mines. I was about to step over a low shrub when I saw a faint glow emitting from the bush. On closer inspection, I noticed that it was a motion detector! The only reason an active motion sensor would be fitted in a remote uninhabited area was because someone or something was inside the small camouflaged compound.

It took me another hour to breach the perimeter without sounding any alarms. I located the entrance that was hidden beneath the rocky hill and made my way through a crudely carved narrow tunnel.

The interior was deserted. There was no sign of Richard. I moved deeper into the dark pit. Then I heard painful whimpers. As my footsteps echoed in the damp stone floor, the cries became louder. It was a woman's voice!

I ran ahead and found myself facing a heavy metal gate. It was bolted with heavy duty metal locks. I covered my face with my left elbow and fired repeatedly at the locks, trying to break the gate open. The steel padlock finally broke and I was able to kick down the barrier.

Inside, the most pitiable sight befell my eyes. A frail woman was chained in a small circular room; the heavy metal chain around her neck was attached to the roof. I couldn't recognize her gaunt face right away but her silvery grey hair looked oddly familiar.

She saw me and gasped. "John!"

I was shocked to see that she knew me. Then I recognized the voice. It was Ekaterina Glazova!

Cynthia's mother was in captivity all these months! It was too shocking for me to digest.

I broke the chain link with a single shot and carried the woman out of the underground tunnel. The former KGB agent must have been kept in starvation for months because she weighed a little more than a child. As I was escorting her away from the terrible place of captivity, Ekaterina told me about what she had gone through for the past eight months.

She told me her sister Anna, who was currently the deputy director of SVR had been holding her in custody. Every morning, Anna Glazova, would arrive on site and torture her in unique ways. Every day, she electrocuted Ekaterina until she suffered from heart attacks. Anna would revive her and apply higher voltage again and again.

"Why would she do that?" I asked the former KGB officer.

Ekaterina sighed. "I don't know," she was wiping tears from her cheek. "Anna kept asking for more information. Everything I knew about the *Rosatom*."

"What is *Rosatom*?"

"Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation," Ekaterina told me. "I had contacts in *Rosatom* who knew a lot about the nuclear bases in our country."

"Why does your sister care?" I asked, confused by the illogical turn of events.

Cynthia's mother continued. "Russia has eleven nuclear power stations with forty operational reactors. *Rosatom* controlled the energy input and kept a tab on the places where nuclear weapons were stored. My sister wanted me to tell her how to access its headquarters. Anna wanted to know all the operational details of *Rostekhnadzor* as well. It is the department that is responsible for implementing safe operating procedures and ensures safe transportation of nuclear material. My guess is Anna was trying to find out the storage location of all our nuclear arsenal."

Dustin, who had been listening in on our conversation the entire time, spoke on my comms. "Something about the lady's story isn't adding up," the hacker warned me.

"What do you mean?" I shot a furtive glance at Ekaterina and waited.

"Cynthia's mother is saying her sister, Anna Glazova had been holding her hostage and tortured her for several months, right? But here is the glitch. According to the SVR website, Deputy Director Anna Glazova was shot dead six months ago."

"That was around the same time Ekaterina disappeared." I finished.

"It's so odd, because the only person I was able to identify within the ten mile radius of the tunnels was Richard, but Ekaterina didn't see him during her captivity. Instead, she saw her sister." Dustin paused. "So, if it wasn't her sister who was torturing her, then who was it?"

"I'll get back to you, Dustin."

"What are you going to do?"

"There is something I need to ask Cynthia's mother." I informed the hacker. "I am starting to think Ekaterina Glazova saw what Richard *wanted* her to see."

After cross-examining the Russian operative, I was able to confirm my suspicion. For six months, Ekaterina was kept in a dark isolated cell. The only human contact she had was through a speaker on the wall. The voice that spoke to her and questioned her belonged to Anna Glazova, her older sister. Ekaterina admitted she never actually saw who attacked and kidnapped her.

Her captor identified as Anna and used the metal chains to administer high voltages of electricity to the middle-aged woman. Ekaterina had no way of ascertaining whether the captor was indeed her sister or an imposter. When I told Cynthia's mother that Anna Glazova was killed around the same time she was being held captive, the woman wept hysterically.

She couldn't believe she had believed her sister was capable of hurting her. Ekaterina told me her heart was in constant denial of what was happening but every morning, when she awoke to the shrill shout of her sister, she began to believe the deputy director of the SVR was indeed evil and would torture her very own sister to death.

December, 2006

I was curious to know how the Russian woman and her family was doing and stopped by her home one evening. To nondescript sedans were parked in front of the brick house. I was confused and warily approached the blacked-out window of one of the cars. The window rolled down and a uniformed security guard nodded authoritatively. When I introduced myself and wanted to know what he was doing on this street, the guard admitted he was hired by a man named Philippe. In a slightly lisping accent, the man also added that his sole job was protecting the family. I was inclined to disbelieve him but then he uttered a code- a series of words I had once taught my dear friend Liam Fleetwood, the former Special Collection Service officer I had worked with during my time at the NSA. If Liam was behind this

protective detail, I knew I could trust these men. I used this opportunity to ask the guard if my family was doing well. He said they had stopped a kidnapping attempt but was unable to identify or capture the kidnappers. I wanted to know who the target was. The reply astounded me. It was the Russian woman's daughter. The teenager was apparently ambushed on her way to middle school but my guards intervened and saved her.

I became worried. Ten years have passed and the attempts on the Russian woman's life did not stop. It had gotten worse. For years, I tried to keep her safe. She reminded me of my very own mother- the woman who lulled me to sleep in my infancy and bore the harshest reprimands in order to raise me.

Now, the Russian woman who I had become familiar with since arriving in America was in a similar dilemma as my own mother had been when I was a mere boy. Her life was in danger. Her children had become targets. I knew Richard was behind this but wondered why the young girl was so valuable to him. He seemed to have shifted his attention on the girl. The woman had three adult sons by now, who were actively involved in school education and colleges but there were no attacks on their lives. Targeting the girl must have been his ultimate goal. My gut feeling told me that it was another of Richard's sick game. He wanted to punish by hurting those who were close to me. I was an orphan who came from Russia. I had no family or friends in America. Clearly, Cynthia's stepfather thought this family meant a lot to me, especially since my former NSA colleagues had furnished them with Secret Service protection. I also happened to have pictures of the children in my safe box.

I became slightly concerned for the safety of the little girl and her brothers. They were the closest thing I had to a sibling. They were playful children, harmless on all accounts, though fiercely playful to the point that even in their adolescence, the boys had little care for anything in life beside hopping and playing. I felt pained to learn that the family- my family- was in danger. If it wasn't for me, or them being somehow related to me, the family's safety would never have been in jeopardy. By the time the little girl went to high school, the attacks on her life intensified. I became more vigilant and often kept personal watch on their property to ensure their safety. I don't know if I had imagined, but numerous times, I noticed that there were men following the Russian woman and her children. They did not try to shoot the family members but seemed intent on capturing her alive.

All this time, I contemplated with my conscious. Should I physically approach the family and give up my identity? Do I tell them who I am? Would it be useful if they knew their entire family is being targeted because of me? No, it would be too painful and shocking for them to digest. They were ordinary civilians. They would panic and attempt to flee. I wouldn't be able to protect them anymore. So, I stayed hidden and watched them from a distance. Since the Russian woman's children were Richard's newest target, I tried to keep them in sight all the time.

For the time being, I hoped they would be safe.

MI6 leaked a dossier the same year in which they blamed Unit 29147 of carrying out an assassination. The victim was a British-naturalized Russian defector who had worked for the GRU secret services prior to moving to England. I found it hard to believe that Unit 29147, which is a specialized unit of Russia's military intelligence agency, would carry out such an unnecessary murder. But the British media were happy to spread the rumor in which MI6 accused Russia of killing a former GRU officer. The man was poisoned to death with a nerve agent. I doubted the orders to kill the man came from Moscow, so I reached out to my friend Dustin who was acquainted with several hackers in the former Soviet Union.

Dustin spoke to his contact in 32335- which is GRU's most advanced cyberunit- and he said that the GRU officer who died in England was killed, not by the Russians, but by a rogue agent who worked in the British intelligence. The British agent probably observed him meeting with several Russian nationals and poisoned him immediately afterwards so that witnesses could confirm that it was Russians that killed him. A State Duma deputy who spoke to me on the condition of anonymity insisted that Kremlin was not behind the poisoning of the former GRU officer. The GRU or GU officer the British man had poisoned was a valuable asset to Moscow. Russia had no reason to want him dead.

It was only six months later that I cornered the British man.

He was hiding in an obscure island off the shore of Scotland. I confronted him with the facts Dustin had shared with me and demanded an explanation for the actions he took concerning the GU officer. He was a skilled agent and tried to get away by charging through the window but I caught him in time. After rigorously questioning him, he told me he was only following orders, but didn't know who his employer was. His instructions only stipulated one condition: the Russian government must be framed scrupulously for the murder. I could not fathom what someone would gain by framing Russia for a single death, but once I learned the identity of the man who hired him, sense started to trickle in my numbed mind.

My eyes refused to believe it when I saw that Cynthia's stepfather had hired the British man to kill the GU officer. At this point, I did not know what Richard's motive was in killing the Russian officer, but the truth would become evident to me almost a year later.

I was so preoccupied with bringing down Richard's billion-dollar empire that I had forgotten that there were other pressing matters affecting the world. The regional conflicts in various parts of Africa were spreading out of control. Dustin flagged large transactions of arms and narcotics between European crime families. He was certain that a huge plan was in motion. How and where was still unknown to me.

Richard was a major shareholder in five petroleum companies. He also signed a deal to build a gas pipeline in a joint venture with Texas Oil Co and BP. It all seemed harmless transactions to me until I tracked down a large cache of weapons being shipped into the New York harbor.

One of my contacts in the underground crime ring alerted me that several trucks of dynamites were being shipped to central Manhattan. The trucks were packed with industry-grade dynamite that are generally used to shatter reinforced concrete. I tried to trace the destination of the vehicles by attempting to intercept the trucks but got pinned down under fire. In the chaos, plainclothes police arrested me and placed in a holding cell. I demanded to see my lawyer, but they told me no one could help me get out of this. I was being charged with domestic terrorism.

This was a shocking revelation to me. Detectives came in my cell all day, brandishing new evidence with each visit. They had apparently discovered caches of weapon and dynamite in my apartment. It went without saying that my fingerprints were all over the bombs. Up to date, I had never been this thoroughly framed. The Department of Justice wanted to charge me with at least ten count of assault and terrorism. I maintained my innocence and was sent to prison for a lifetime. I remember the date my sentencing took place: December of 2000. A new president had just been elected into the White House. People were still protesting about possible vote rigging. But all I could think of was the trucks of explosives that were out in the open because I had failed to neutralize the threat in time. Who knew how many innocent people are going to be killed with those dynamites?

The attacks on New York City in September of 2001 was something I never believed would actually happen. I had raced against time, trying to halt the attacks, to disarm the missiles that were being launched towards Washington D.C. but on each occasion, my enemies outwitted me. I learned much later the identities of the men who had planned the attack on America's financial districts. They had an elaborate plan to declare a coup and overthrow the democratically elected government. Numerous oil rich countries were to be invaded at once after the martial law was passed, but luckily my I managed to get into Washington, and remove the bombs. The missile, which the American authorities wanted to call Flight 93, was supposed to hit the White House, and like the twin towers, the ancient House was supposed to be brought down in controlled demolitions, and the Congress, Senate were meant to be destroyed. The US constitution was to be destroyed on the morning of September 11, 2001.

Inwardly, I was glad that the FBI leaked a concocted narrative to the public and publicized that the Flight 93 crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers overpowered the hijackers. The truth would have been too jarring for the Netizens of America. But some people saw through the cracks such as the mayor of Cleveland who claimed that on the morning of September 11, Flight 93 received a bomb threat and was directed to land in Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and was evacuated. The passengers were shuttled into a NASA research facility and they were never seen again. The mayor insisted that the federal government decided to salvage this crisis by claiming that Flight 93 went down in Pennsylvania, killing all passengers aboard.

Many Netizens began to question the facts and wondered if Flight 93 was sitting in Cleveland airport, then what exactly hit Shanksville. I hoped they never found out that Dustin downed a missile there that was meant to hit the rotunda of the Capitol building.

My thoughts raced back to the year before, in late 1999. It was the last day of August when I got the message. I had received a tip from a contact in Moscow who told me that the FSB was coordinating a large false flag operation in the Russian capitol. The person who tipped me off was a former KGB official who I had saved many years ago. However, as part of the administrative shuffle in the new regime that was swept into power, Kremlin changed the KGB into FSB. A part of me wanted to fly to Moscow and investigate the allegations but I was genuinely afraid. I felt ashamed to admit it to myself but I was frightened with the idea of going back to a country where it all began. My native place. The place where my mother was killed. The land that I called home. The nation that sentenced me to death only to resurrect me and turn me into a ruthless spy. Everything that I was, I owed it to the USSR. But I have never suffered more anywhere else either. When I fled the Camp, I never intended to set foot on the Eurasian federation again.

It was already September 1st, 1999. According to the intel we had received, an attack on Moscow's civilian population was imminent. Although the person who sought my help was formerly a KGB agent, he now was a State Duma deputy, working in the legislative branch of the Russian parliament. He received his intel about the Moscow bombing from a GRU officer weeks earlier and

was counting on me to prevent it. I was not in Russia for many years but I knew the GRU are a term people use when referring to employees of the Second Central Department of the General Staff.

Dustin and I discussed what could be done. We needed to do ground research to find out what the FSB had planned. Without physically breaking into their headquarters in Lubyanka, I had no way of knowing who or what their targets were. The Russian hackers were as good as Dustin was if not better. I considered seeking Richard's help in this case so I called his personal number. He didn't reply to my call so I asked Dustin to track his phone location. After several long minutes, Dustin looked pale.

"What is it?" I asked.

"He is there," the hacker said. "Richard. He is in Moscow."

"What!" I moved nearer the computer screen and saw the red dot glowing in Lubyanskaya Square. "What on earth is Cynthia's father doing at the headquarters of the KGB?"

Dustin shook his head to express his ignorance in the matter. "Do you think Richard might know a little more about the attack that was supposed to happen in Moscow?" The hacker sounded anxious. I knew Dustin's brother lived somewhere in the Soviet capitol. I couldn't blame him for being worried about his own family.

I thought of another angle to solve the dilemma. "Dustin, can you hack into Richard's phone and get me the number of every person he spoke to or messaged since arriving in Moscow?"

"Working on it," the hacker replied instantly. "That is not a very long list. I have six active numbers. One was unlisted and is now deactivated."

"Okay, let's call those people. Use an automated message that says- let's see, how about saying that the plan needs to be rearranged. We have a problem."

Dustin stared at me. "That's all? *The plan needs to be rearranged. We have a problem.* It's done. The message should be in their cellular phone's inbox any second."

"Let's wait for the call," I gave him a reassuring smile and fiddled with my cell phone. "Oh, before they call back, I need Richard's voice prints. How fast can you manipulate voice recognition so that when I speak to them, I'll sound exactly like Richard?"

"I already did. The voicemail I sent them was in Richard's voice, remember?" Dustin said. "Now, when they call, just talk as normally as you can. They won't know for a second that you are an imposter."

"Nice thinking," I took a deep breath and studied the phone.

Dustin waited for a few moments before asking, "Why couldn't the State Duma deputy, I mean your contact who tipped us off, why didn't he alert authorities about the impending attacks?"

"The State Duma deputy did alert the FSB and warned them that a terrorist attack was likely to take place soon but the intelligence services dismissed his concerns."

"Which means they are likely involved?" Dustin remarked haltingly.

"Or someone in their ranks has been paid or coerced," I suggested. Just then the phone rang: I waited until the third ring and replied in the slow drawl Richard usually uses when speaking to his old acquaintances.

"Richard, your message worried us," a high-pitched voice called out. "How bad are the problems you are facing? Do we have to abort the mission entirely?"

"That depends, old friend." I replied slowly. "Have you finalized the plan?"

"Three of the locations have been set completely," the man replied. "I am sending our trusted FSB operatives to the fourth location as soon as we receive your shipment."

"How much more do you need?" I said, trying to sound confident.

"Preferably another truck of the similar grade explosives."

"Excellent. Tell me, when and where." I waited with baited breath, hoping he gave up the location of the target building.

The man readily recited an address of a residential building in Ryazan and told me it would be the fourth and last target.

This piece of news did not surprise me greatly. I had suspected that Ryazan was a chief target. Cynthia's father clearly had me followed and knew everything about my mother's family. My maternal grandmother was from a suburb in Ryazan. I just felt that it might be a target so I had alerted local police a day earlier to execute a surgical search on the city to find the weapon's cache that might be used to bomb the city.

Two months after the Moscow bombings, my contact at the FSB who had worked at the Department for the Protection of Constitutional Order and Combating Terrorism told me that dozens of high-ranking members of the Russian intelligence community actively participated in the terrorist attacks. In addition to that, Russian state security agents had evidence that the terrorist attacks in Moscow were the work of the FSB, but they were warned not to pursue this line of investigation.

According to an FSB agent, Russia deliberately blew up the apartment buildings in Moscow in order to justify the start of military operations in North Caucasus. It was an open secret. The bombings took place right before the election campaign and once a new president came into power, all the domestic bombings were halted. But when I conducted further investigation, I found out that I was the reason hundreds of Muscovites died in September 1999. It was because of me that Cynthia's father decided instill civilian casualty in my parent's homeland. He blamed imaginary terrorists for the attacks but in reality, he had paid and coerced numerous Russian intelligence agencies to let the bombings take place. If I had not flown to Moscow in time, Richard would have been successful in carrying out many other attacks on Moscow and other neighboring cities.

Buynaksk was hit first. The Moscow explosion came nine days after the one in Buynaksk. Over a twelve-day span, three major attacks took place. I remembered my conversation with the man whose number I had gotten from Richard's phone. He inadvertently gave up the location of the fourth bombing, so I was able to alert the local Moscow police about the potential explosives in the building. As per my intel, specialists from the Moscow police raided the building and managed to prevent a fourth bombing that month. When police apprehended the suspects, they were shocked to see they were FSB members who had planted the explosives. During interrogation, the intelligence officers were swift to call their mission an exercise. However, I knew Cynthia's stepfather had a giant role in the whole fiasco, but I didn't want the Russian government to think that the former director of the NSA black op division was tampering with their secret services. In any case, I couldn't prevent the three other bombings that week. By then, hundreds of Russian citizens were dead and the nation was in panic; it was among the deadliest series of terrorist attacks in the world at that time.

At that time, I found it strange to believe that the state security service officers who helped kill hundreds of Muscovites were planning the bombings lounging in their offices at number 1 Bolshaya Lubyanka Street, but my contact assured me it was all a political maneuver. The intelligence officers had no idea that a real bomb was to be detonated, but several former FSB agents who were hired by Richard enabled the bombings to take place. Richard's priority was to frame Chechen citizens for the Moscow bombing so that as soon as the attack took place, he would leak the news that Chechnya was behind it.

I could not imagine why Richard was interested in a tiny area in Russia's North Caucasus, but later I found out that it was an oil-rich province that had declared independence. The bombings of September 1999 had far reaching consequences. When Moscow was able to blame Chechen rebels for the apartment building bombings in 1999, it declared a blitzkrieg-style attack on the tiny nation. This became known as the second Chechen war.

I never thought such large-scale bombing would be carried out in reality. I still am haunted by my relative inaction. If I had flown to Moscow months earlier, I may have been able to avert all of the bombings, but the inbred fear in me took precedence. I feared the ghost of the former colonel of the KGB who recruited me from prison. I dreaded the Camp and all the horrible things I was forced to do there. Regardless of the excuse I gave myself, whenever I think of the Russian widows and mothers who lost their loved one in those bombings, my heart burns.

I continued tracing Richard's connection to the terrorist attacks in Moscow and concluded that although several former FSB agents planted the bombs in the Moscow apartment buildings, Richard had financed the operation and supplied them with explosives. On more than one occasion, he threatened the Russian agents and their family if they diverged from the attack plan. It was some weeks later that I discovered his motive for carrying out an international terrorist attack. His oil company had purchased a significant share in the Russian state oil company, Bresneft, who in turn permitted him to build a refinery in Chechnya. Russia's oil industry depended on Chechen oil which it transported using a major pipeline that ran through the Caucasus republic.

After Dustin analyzed Richard's bank accounts, he concluded that Richard had profited directly from the Chechen invasion and was able to receive premium quality cheap oil which he was in turn selling to American airline companies at a much higher price. I used an anonymous website to send the information to the NSA so they could make the DA press charges against Cynthia's father, but instead of firing him, they downgraded his network privileges for the duration of their investigation. Officially, Richard was still not dismissed from his position.

When I was investigating the Moscow bombings in 1999, I never imagined that I would sitting in a cold cell this time next year. Life has so many unexpected turns stored for us that anticipating them would be inconceivable.

The prison I was locked in was dreadful. In addition to solitary, there were no access to the outside world. For nearly eleven months, I was not given a newspaper to read. I didn't know what was happening in the world outside. It was in those that year that I learned that the greatest pain you can inflict on someone is ignorance. Staying oblivious to the world was eating away at my spirits. I was despondent.

Never to be Deserted

Has any mortal perceived my piercing cries,
Or felt the pain in my heart-felt sighs?
I have but one hope left for me-
And that is my Lord's magnanimity!

My Lord! Grant me Thy forgiveness,
One that shall never be withdrawn,
And hold not to account my surpluses,
Though I alone have been wrong.

Include me among the inheritors,
Of Thy promised Heaven,
And let my dreams not die in vain,
Unto the abyss to be forgotten!

September, 2002

I met Aleksandr Sobyenin, the Chairman of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee who had agreed to lend me some information pertaining the 9/11 incident in New York City and Pennsylvania.

"Zdrastvuite, Aleksandr Sobyenin," I greeted him, making sure to address him using his first name combined with his patronymic. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"To be very honest with you, I was eager to prevent my nation from being attacked," the foreign affairs committee official responded. "The Russian Federation dispatched a team of deputies to meet with American counterparts. We are here to salvage our national relationship. We are infuriated by these allegations that somehow Moscow is behind the American attacks."

"An official at the NSA reportedly has proof that Kremlin was behind the September 11 attacks," I said, without giving away Richard's name. I didn't want Cynthia's stepfather to become a target for the Russian Intelligence.

"Moscow never sanctioned the murder of friendly Americans. We want peace and prosperity in our neighboring countries. It is a disgrace that some people blame our government of being assassins."

"I think you are entitled to be upset," I told him. "My friend is a code breaker. He hacked into the newspaper that first published this article about Russia's alleged involvement in the 9/11 attacks of 2001. It came from an untraceable email account that was rerouted through all the continents before bouncing off a satellite in Los Angeles. I was able to personally trace the e-link and find out who owned the secure satellite."

"Who is that treacherous man?" Sobyenin demanded.

"Let me handle him, but if you must know, he is one of the former directors of NSA but now runs a covert black ops program. He is not an American."

"Not American?" The Russian politician said quizzically. "I don't understand."

"The man who was responsible for trying to frame Russia for the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers is of Austrian-Hungarian origin but was born and raised in Hamburg. He moved to the United States in his early twenties and was recruited by the NSA for espionage work. He was part of the US Intelligence network but is now essentially a world-class mercenary who is responsible for at least dozens of major bombings worldwide."

"What would your black ops man gain by pitting Americans against Russians?" Sobyenin asked.

I frowned at the Russian politician. "You should understand that the man we are dealing with is a ruthless mercenary. He has allegiance to no country, least of all the United States. Do you think if he had an ounce of compassion for Americans, he would organize the multitude of attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon?"

"If he attacked Americans, then why is Russia a suspect?"

I answered softly. "The NSA rouge officer had worked hard to frame certain high-ranking Russian officials for the attack. Now, you must help me so we can work together and find out the identities of the real perpetrators and exonerate Kremlin from any involvement." I chose not to mention that when some Americans see Russia, they have the perfect pantomime villain.

"The Russian intelligence agency had nothing to do with the American incident, nor did we have anything to do with the Moscow bombings of 1999, as much as how eagerly some media outlets blame the secret services for letting it happen," the Chairman of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee said calmly. "Our G.R.U. which is now known as the G.U. or Main Directorate is responsible for handling foreign threats against Russia. They concluded that the recent news about Moscow's involvement with some tribal militants is fake. It is a smear campaign against our country. But enough of our problems. You called me in here to discuss something else, yes?"

"Yes, Aleksandr Sobyenin. Your insight into the September 11th incident of 2001 would be helpful," I said, awash with relief that I would finally learn something valuable.

"I have an amiable relationship with the director of the Joint Command and Control Warfare Center. The Command Center had been monitoring the safety protocols on that fateful day and discovered something bizarre. It appeared as though the U.S. defense system was on high alert, with its nuclear launchers mobilized."

"American defense systems are programmed to arm itself when the nation is under attack," I tried to explain.

Aleksandr Sobyenin cleared his throat. "It would have been a natural reaction had the American weapons been activated after the bombing of the Twin Towers, but no, this happened prior to that. Now, the reason I am here today, is because I was being briefed by our FSB officers in the Lubyanka building on the morning of September 11, 2001. Moscow was very worried about the DEFCON alert in the United States, particularly due to the fact that American nukes had been armed and prepared to launch."

"Did FSB find out where the nukes were supposed to be launched at?"

"That is a good question," Sobyenin remarked. "One that worried us greatly, terrified us to tell the truth. The nuclear weapons were being aimed at Russia. And before you wonder why that was so, let me tell you. Russian spy planes had been monitoring U.S. skies for a long time, and we did encounter chatter that an attack on key cities was imminent."

"Why didn't you alert Washington?" I said, aghast.

"We wanted to, but when we realized that some elements within the U.S. government were planning this attack, our overseas FSB office decided to wait and watch." The Chairman of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee paused. "Our ambassador did send word out to the CIA, but without compromising out intelligence gathering channels, we could not disclose our sources. But the Agency was unhappy with our intrusion and on the day of the actual attack, someone high up in the military chain of command ordered the nukes to be readied and aimed at Russian interests. This was a warning. Threatening us with nukes if the FSB went public with its report."

"What report?"

"Ah, you are still confused," the Russian politician looked at my bloodless face and sighed. "You see, while the rest of the world believed that America was attacked by Middle Eastern hijackers, Russia knew the truth. Our intelligence services had known for months how some members among the American military and government officials coordinated the missile strikes on the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and the White House. That was where the Flight 93 was supposed to hit, if I remember correctly. It was to be followed by a coup which Russia didn't want."

"Why would Russia care if America had a coup?"

"Because martial law does not serve us too well. We had justifiable reasons to worry about our nation's safety. If the U.S. Capital was destroyed, then the generals who would have assumed power might have decided to launch those nukes at Russia. No, we wanted to prevent those attacks."

"Then why didn't you?" I said, pain welling in up in my chest. I remembered the morning of September 11th so vividly in my mind. I was racing through Constitution Avenue, trying to alert the Secret Service to have the White House evacuated. It broke my heart to see that Russian intelligence agency had known about the impending disasters and could have done something to prevent the carnage. I took a deep breath and inquired, "Why didn't the Russian government do something and saved thousands of American lives?"

"As I told you before, there were men in the American agencies who were hopelessly corrupt. We did send alerts and other tips, but it was ignored. Someone within the NSA or the CIA wanted the attacks to happen. And my guess is that since we already knew this information, whoever planned the 9/11 attacks wanted to silence Mother Russia forever and therefore, armed the nuclear launchers aiming the missiles at Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk."

“Are you certain? The United States would not have done something so dramatic.”

“Once we discovered that the United States government was carrying out some sort of major illegal experiment, the FSB relayed the information to the Russian president. By this time, the Twin Towers had been hit, and Russian spy planes knew well that it was not a terrorist attack at all but a carefully coordinated military strike. One of our Air Defense commanders considered exposing the incident, but the chief planners of the attack immediately threatened to unleash nuclear might on Russia if we dared to expose the truth. Nuclear warhead from Barksdale Air Force Base was armed and ready, facing several major Russian cities. Of course, Russia needed no further encouragement and our leaders immediately called President Bush to offer his condolence and to assure him that Russian spy planes would forget about everything they saw. They would go along with the U.S. version of the events. This wise insight on the part of our premier averted a potential nuclear disaster. When America delivered an ultimatum to Russia that the United States would seize Afghanistan along with all Soviet bases in central Asia, we decided to, how do Americans say it- play nice. Do you think it was a coincidence that Russia was the first foreign nation to formally offer their condolences on the day of the September 11th attacks? We had to.”

I was unconvinced and pressed on. “Your source may have made a mistake. In American, only the president has authority to launch a nuclear missile.”

“That is true but there is one exception. You recall I have mentioned Global Guardian: a *massive* exercise in nuclear blackmail? Well, the Global Guardian designed an exercise providing a specific back door to launch nuclear missiles without reference to the nuclear launch codes which were supposedly the monopoly of the president. Some rouge general or politician may have easily launched the nuclear missiles from Barksdale Air Force Base without the help of President Bush.”

“But they didn’t, did they? I mean ultimately no general or politician in America would have been so foolish.”

The Chairman of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee pursed his lips. “The credit of averting a nuclear disaster goes to Russia. Our president was aware of what might happen next if he didn’t act cautiously so he immediately called his American counterpart and sought assurance that the US Defcon Delta was not a cover for a thermonuclear attack upon our country. It was for this reason that Putin became the first world leader to call George W. Bush: in order to avoid a possible thermonuclear exchange. He also told Bush that he had ordered a stand down of Russian strategic forces, meaning that the maneuvers planned for the Arctic Region were cancelled. In turn, the American leader told him that the thermonuclear launches from the US toward the Middle East and other areas were the work of a rogue network, not of the constituted government, but we knew better than to raise alarm. Since then, our leader conceded on nearly everything the Bush Administration asked for, including seizing Afghanistan and using all of the Soviet bases in Asia.”

“Aleksandr Sobyenin, there is another reason for why I came to see you. It is about a message you sent. How did you come up with the idea of contacting Dustin?”

“Dustin?” Sobyenin repeated. “The super computer boy! Yes, I remember. I had a contact in the KGB who talked about this brilliant boy who had enough skills to create a supercomputer. Officially, he was dead. To the Russian government, I mean. He was living in America, in hiding. Months before the September 11 attacks of 2001, I sent him some messages about the upcoming attacks and he told me he would have one of his friends investigate. Until this day, I never learned exactly what happened to them or what the boy did with the information I sent him.”

I smiled inwardly knowing that unbeknownst to himself, the State Duma deputy was referring to my dear friend Dustin. I still wanted to be sure, so asked, “What was his name?”

“His name?” Sobyenin chuckled. “That boy changed his name several hundred time in the past few decades. No one knows what alias he is using right now.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure of it,” I was muttering to myself.

Aleksandr Sobyenin stared at me curiously but I dismissed his concerns. “I am grateful for your input. Thank you for your time.”

I took leave from the Russian politician and headed to the Dustin’s temporary residence at a lakeside villa in Pittsburg. From a distance, it looked like an ordinary villa snuggled within a green oasis of trees that scrumptiously hid it from view. The hacker had fortified the glass villa with military grade security including undetectable infrared beams that crisscrossed the perimeter. I strolled through the front door, ignoring the invisible alarms and weaponized remotely. From the many years I had been acquainted with him, I knew Dustin was unparalleled in efficiency and skill. He would have detected me from a mile away.

My thoughts went back to the long years at the Soviet training Camp where I had first met the computer genius. He had been a teenager, devoted to his computers and gadgets. I was a novice who was computer illiterate but Dustin taught me the basic skills, which was enough for me to survive in the deadly world of espionage. I didn’t know much about his back ground except that like most people in the Camp, his family thought he was dead.

Dustin was born in the city of Yekaterinburg at Sverdlovsk Oblast but he did not live there long. At the age of fifteen, he stumbled across a Soviet military research facility near his city. By sheer luck and haphazard skill, he manipulated the automatic locks on the bullet-resistant entrance and slipped in unnoticed. He was halfway through downloading massive cache of classified data when he was apprehended and taken to a remote prison complex under the Ural Mountains. It was not long before military intelligence officers recognized the genius of the young boy and began to train him to be a professional codebreaker. He was removed from civilian life, furnished with a new identity and sent to a KGB training Camp at Krasnoyarsk.

Inside the Camp, I was promoted to the position of Senior Agent in Section 61, a fortified castle in East Germany. It was an undercover spy agency unknown to even most G.U. or FSB agents. Section 61 was so clandestine that there was no paper trail to prove that it even existed. When we worked there, Dustin was the head of the IT department all the way until I was sent to America and ultimately defected.

When the Colonel realized that I had withdrawn my allegiance to the Camp and was no longer carrying out assassination for him, he ordered every agent in my Section to locate and cancel me. The sector leader began an international manhunt for me and the Section's computer expert, Dustin, was in charge of tracking me down, which, genius as he was, he accomplished almost instantly. The Colonel used Dustin's intel and captured me within a week. Back in the Camp, I was tortured mercilessly and nearly died several times.

Dustin, who was in control of all the technical appliances of Section 61 observed what I was going through via the security cameras, and his humanity overtook his fear of the Colonel.

He couldn't tolerate my suffering and took the initiative to hack into my cell. Dustin disabled the cameras and helped me escape. I feared that the Colonel may find out Dustin had helped me so I wanted to rescue him but Dustin insisted on staying. A short while later, Dustin's computer students filtered through his work and found out that he had helped me get away from Section 61. They reported him to the commander and he was immediately locked inside the torture chamber. By this time, I made contact with freelance security personnel and launched a massive rescue mission in which we finally managed to get Dustin away from the horrific Camp.

I also had several contacts in the NSA who helped him enter mainland America and supplied him with the computing equipment he required. Dustin soon started hacking again and assisted me in many of my side jobs with the American intelligence agencies. I can count at least a hundred separate occasions in which Dustin saved my life and protected me from a certain and painful end.

When I first arrived in America, I was apprehensive and couldn't trust anyone. But there was one person I thought I could turn to, and he was the man who promised me my freedom. He was the former head of the NSA's black ops division and had his own personal clandestine program running alongside his government operations. Even though he had initially helped us escape from Russia, I later grew wary of his ways and unconventional methods. I began to examine the pervasive and pernicious ways in which the man managed his undercover programs. Some of the missions he sent me to were clearly not sanctioned by the CIA or the State Department. My suspicions intensified.

By the end of the year 2000, I believed my former benefactor was teaming up with a European company to steal large cache of gold from New York's federal reserves. Dustin tapped into his satellite phone and found out that the storage that was to be raided was *under* the World Trade Center buildings.

I knew that billions of dollars' worth of gold bars was stored under those giant Towers and those gold were missing from the basement storage of the Twin Towers after the 9/11 attacks.

This made me suspect that the attacks on the World Trade Center buildings were a diversion to make authorities confused. I suspected that my former helper at the NSA was intending to overthrow the U.S government and seize power because from his travel logs, it appeared as though the main target of the 9/11 attacks was the White House and the Capitol Building.

Dustin intercepted urgent messages that were flagged in his threat assessment app and he alerted me on the morning of September 11, 2001, imploring me to personally check the locations that may be targeted. I immediately drove to Washington D.C. to talk to local Secret Service members and assess the security of the buildings myself.

I had personally witnessed the NSA man shipping large truckloads of explosives the week before so I guessed that there might be bombs planted under the White House tunnels. There were also messages in which Richard had mentioned planting bombs in the basement tunnels of the White House and fly a projectile at the rotunda. I had to stop the attacks but didn't know who to trust.

I was headed to the Capitol building that morning. As I sped through the Constitution Avenue, my heart raced. I had to get to the main gates in time. Just then, a truck rammed into the belly of my vehicle and knocked me senseless. When I regained my consciousness, I felt a steel grip on my throat. I couldn't breathe! Fighting to open my eyes, I saw a man at the driver's side. He was squeezing my neck with two large hands. I used my injured arms to pry the vice-like grip but to no avail. The assailant was slowly squeezing the life out of me. With a final surge of energy, I managed to change the gear to reverse and slammed my foot down on the gas. The car shot back, throwing the killer off balance. Once I was at a safe distance, I stumbled out of the car and blindly followed the

street signs until I reached the guard house. Secret service men were huddled about it. When they saw my bloody state, they immediately took me into custody.

The Secret Service didn't even let me get close to my destination. They arrested me and took me to a sublevel interrogation room. When one of the guards began to question me, I noticed that the cameras were blinking. I was confused, but aware that everything I was saying in this room was being recorded and inspected by those who were potentially behind the attacks. I couldn't answer the questions. I couldn't tell the senior secret service agents that the White House was under attack and could be bombed any minute. So, I acted impulsively and jumped to my feet. I grabbed the agent who was interrogating me in a headlock and whispered inaudibly what I knew about the 9/11 attacks. I told him that there was likely a time bomb set in one of the West tunnels of the White House. He looked terrified at my words but immediately left the room. One hour later, he came in with a set of keys and uncuffed my chains. He said I was free to go. It seemed that they had indeed found the bomb, but there were three of them, not one. The secret service agent told me someone important had vouched for me so he knew I could be trusted. I didn't know at that time who it was but as I later found out, the former first lady who knew me from the years I helped her husband, had called the head of the Secret Service and told them I had credible intel and should be released.

Dustin's hacking couldn't get me too far either but fortunately I had sought the help of the former first lady who was also a senator. She believed me when I told her the Capitol Building and the White House may be hit by a bomb soon. She gave me access to the buildings and I was able to remove a high-powered bomb from the underground tunnels, but just when I breathed in relief and thought the worst was over, Dustin got bad news. He received an alert on his computer that showed a missile was headed to Washington.

The trajectory was aimed right at the Capitol Building. When Dustin shared the ominous news with me, I panicked. My eyes were glued to the skies like a madman and I told Dustin to stop the missile at any cost, but he replied with the obvious. Once the missile was launched, there was no way to reverse the attack. I then asked him to hack into the missile system and divert it away from the capitol. Dustin obeyed my instructions and was doing just that when two more alerts flashed on his computer screen. Another local missile was being fired at the Pentagon. Then another two projectiles were speeding towards the Twin Towers. Dustin tried to contact me again but I was in the underground tunnels of Washington D.C. trying to locate any other bombs that may have been placed there. My hacker friend didn't know what to do, so he proceeded with what he thought I had asked him to do: save the US capitol at all cost.

Dustin stayed on the missile that was aimed at the Capitol Building and he slowed it down by jamming its antenna before crashing it on an empty farmland in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Although there was no debris there of a plane, the FBI decided it was in the best interest of the local population to believe that Shanksville was the crash site for Flight 93. They hastily propagated the official story that the passengers in Flight 93 were allegedly trying to overpower hijackers who were in the plane and in the struggle, Flight 93 crashed into Shanksville, Pennsylvania at 10:00 am.

However, Dustin and I were the only two people who knew that the projectile that had crashed into Shanksville was not Flight 93. It was a missile which my Russian codebreaker friend crashed in there to stop it from hitting Washington D.C. Had it reached its target, America would not have been what it is today. A coup would have taken place within hours of the destruction of the US capital and the Russian Federation, that had been carefully framed for the disaster, would have faced the nuclear wrath of the United States defense forces. I understate when I say America would not have been the same if Dustin and I hadn't intervened with the missile's trajectory, because the truth is the world would have been astronomically different, and the homeland of my mother would have been incinerated forever. I have seen the Russophobia industry in the United States that was devoted to a systematic and structured demonization of Russia, reducing all Muscovites into a single undifferentiated class of angry spies. I knew a mammoth incident such as the September 11th attack of 2001 would have destroyed any goodwill Americans had towards Russians.

The missile was a large one and it did some damage on the ground, but Dustin made sure the place he crashed the missile was empty. Fortunately, there were no significant wreckage in the area. Most people forgot about the incident and never looked for the imaginary plane.

I was proud of Dustin's hard work and devotion. He had essentially saved the entire constitutional government of the United States.

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, Dustin had done research and concluded that the attacks on the morning of September 11, 2001 was pre-planned and was local made. Since I was the only person in the world he could trust, he apprised me of the situation. I told him to keep digging into the issue and personally went to New York to investigate the entire affair. We didn't know who to trust in the U.S. government so I decided to make public what we knew. I mailed a movie director some of our files to make a TV show. The producers agreed and the show finally came out in March 2001. It was a pedestrian movie, but I hoped *The Lone Groundmen*, as was the title I picked for the show, would deter those who were planning the 9/11 attacks from going through with their carnage. I was grateful to Fox channel for airing the Show because in it, I added passages that suggested that the Twin Towers would be under attack soon.

Aleksandr Sobyenin, the Chairman of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, who I had met soon after the 9/11 attacks had generously shared some files from his FSB office. It had charts, flight plans and building layouts. He said his informant in the CIA told him some major building in New York and Washington would be under attack. Following his lead, Dustin tracked down an unusual shipment coming into New York and informed me right away. I went there to intercept it and unsurprisingly saw that it was truckloads of explosive material used for controlled demolition.

The Russian hacker did everything in his power to prevent the missile from hitting the capitol. It was doubly difficult because in those days, few people were skilled in drone navigation and Dustin was no expert in drone controls, but he knew enough to divert a missile away. But there were several other simultaneous targets. We chose to save the capitol and thus the US government. I knew if the government collapsed, there would be utter chaos. We did it to prevent a martial law, but ultimately, we couldn't save too many people. The Twin Towers still crumbled and the Bush Administration assumed dictatorial power and used the fake video of bin Laden to launch attacks on Afghanistan. And later- Iraq. The weeks that followed, Dustin and I watched the news with a pained heart: we could see how the American people were being lied to and made to believe that some Middle Eastern juveniles were responsible for the deadly attacks on September, 2001.

But the real pain that I had to live with, something that reduces me to tears even until this day, was that despite having foreknowledge of the attacks on the Twin Towers, Dustin and I could not save those three thousand men and women from utter annihilation. I remember watching the news feed that showed the WTC buildings burning and my heart felt as though it was ripping apart. I had called Dustin, entreating him to do something, work out a miracle and switch off all the bombs. Between bursts of sobs, I asked him if there was any way to reverse the missiles and when he replied in negative, I made the fateful decision.

Dustin complied and took control of the missile that was heading towards the capitol buildings and diverted it to a field in Shanksville. Maybe we should have chosen to save those three thousand American men and women who were in the WTC. The government may have been destroyed, but the American people would have been able to pull through. The people who were working in the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001- they would still be alive. But I decided to save lives judging from the class and status of men and women. Instead of hacking into the missile that was heading to the WTC, I asked my dear friend Dustin to intercept the one that was meant for Washington D.C. And the politicians whose lives we saved that morning, they simply woke up the next day and decided to invade a country that had nothing to do with the attacks.

Once we had thwarted the attacks on the US capital, I inwardly hoped that this would be the end of bloodshed for at least a century. Surely, the men who planned the initial attack would not be so foolish as to try again!

It appeared as though I was wrong on both accounts. In November of 2001, I received an urgent phone call from a contact in St. Petersburg. He was seeking my help concerning the disappearance of eighteen Russian intelligence officers who had fallen off the grid. His colleagues were never in the habit of halting all radio contacts so abruptly. My contact was sure something untoward had happened. I promised to look into the issue and got in touch with Dustin. After explaining the issue, the Russian hacker agreed to investigate the matter and attempt to locate the men.

Six days later, Dustin tracked down a capsized boat in the Chukchi Sea. There were no official survivors but eyewitnesses at Point Hope Airport reported to have seen at least a dozen injured men escorted to the tarmac. Most were heavily sedated or unconscious. Following surveillance footages from around the Alaskan airport, we discovered that the plane that left Point Hope touched down in New York. It was in one of JFK airport's security camera that confirmed my suspicions. The Russian agents who were kidnapped from the Alaskan port were indeed the same men who had been brought to New York City.

My mind was numb with worry. I alerted the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and informed them that at least a dozen Russian nationals were being held captive in one of the local airlines or airports and should be rescued at once. Convincing US border agents to help me was harder than I had imagined. My faint Russian accent and demeanor would often work against me as the law enforcement agencies refused to believe anything I had to say. To be from Russia meant one was thoroughly degenerate. The assumptions of American superiority was so ingrained in political, legal, and defense structures in the United States that it almost caused them to demonize anything remotely Russian and disregard the warning of a Russian national. Ultimately, one of my known associates forwarded my concern to the relevant authorities and the investigation commenced. At this point, neither I nor Dustin could fathom the reason behind the abduction. But we didn't have to wait for long to find out. On November 12, Dustin told me he was monitoring an American Airlines Flight 587 that just took off from John F. Kennedy Airport and was acting suspiciously. When I asked him to elaborate, he told me that the packed jetliner's transponder was off and it was veering off course.

I immediately called a general who was stationed at the air defense military installation near Westhampton Beach and apprised him of my fears and suspicions. He immediately mobilized his men and readied a fighter jet to intercept the plane, which had by now, heading towards Washington D.C. and was increasing speed. I also told the American general that there were approximately eighteen Russian hostages on board who were likely set to take the blame of the attack that was about to take place.

Senior officers from the Air National Guard Base were quick to take action. They had just recovered from the deadliest attack in American history only months earlier and did not wish a repeat of the 9/11 incident so they sent fighter jets to escort the plane to the ground. However, whoever had planned this coup was uninterested in cooperating with the United States Air Force, and in the melee, the jetliner lost control and crashed over the Rockaway Peninsula of Queens, New York City.

Over two hundred and fifty people were killed in that accident, making it one of the deadliest aviation incidents in US history. It was unfortunate that once again, we were unable to save the passengers Flight 587. I felt particularly grieved when forensics specialist contacted me a week later to notify me that the eighteen Russian agents were found in the cargo compartment of the airplane. He suspected that they had been deceased *prior* to boarding the plane and were likely chosen as scapegoats for the intended attack. Once more, the US media was gracefully shielded from the truth. The National Transportation Safety Board felt that there was no need for the American public to find out that another major terrorist attack was about to take place in the very city that had suffered so much already.

I, for once, agreed. There was too much pain and loss here. And we were able to do so little to prevent the worst from happening. What would happen to this world? How many more people had to die before we could finally bring peace? I studied the images of the crash site of Flight 587. It was so painful to see bodies of women and children crushed under the steel rubble. Tons of disintegrated body parts, humans who had dreams to live up to, who had loved ones to mourn them- were all dead in a single act of terror.

Tears welled in my eyes as I thought of how mundane and worthless my existence was. It was my fault. How could I not have saved those passengers of the doomed plane? I wanted to wail into the oblivion when I remembered all the mothers who had lost their children in that plane, all the parents who would never again see their son or daughter, all because of me. What misery and grief are those mothers enduring now? I cannot think of it!

It is truly immeasurable and indescribable. Those frightened infants on the plane who had been clutching to their mother's sleeve and lapel as the plane veered off course, those elderly passengers who undoubtedly shrieked in despair when the nose of the plane plunged thousands of feet, I can never imagine the terror they must have experienced. How stricken must those mothers have felt when their children held on to them and they knew that this was one time they couldn't protect or save their offspring from the inevitable death. I should have tried harder! I should have found a way to somehow take control of the plane and land the jet safely to an appropriate landing space. But I couldn't. I failed those innocent passengers. They had all died prematurely. And it was my fault.

I wanted to scream in anguish and misery. It was not fair that the innocent civilians always had to die for the sins of a handful who wanted to cause terror and seize power. My knees trembled and I cried bitterly as I vowed to find those responsible for the murders and bring them to justice.

I began my investigation by enlisting the help of my dear friend and asked Dustin to track the explosives that were planted inside the World Trade Center and try to identify the men who may have set those charges.

My friend bypassed security and checked the itinerary of the WTC buildings and was able to persuade the management to cooperate. What he found was jarring. World Trade Center building security said that in the weeks leading to the attacks, most of the offices in the Twin Towers and World Trade Center building 7 were empty because there were multiple evacuations of those buildings. According to an IT specialist Dustin spoke to, there were unprecedented power outages on the weekend prior to the morning of 9/11, during which time all the cameras were down. I was heartbroken not being able to find solid proof of tampering but it was clear that anyone could have slipped in the towers undetected and planted those controlled demolition charges. My quest had begun.

February, 2003

It was already 2003. I have been in and out of prison sporadically! The second time I was framed for a bombing and thrown into jail, I began to lose all hope of seeing daylight, but a new prosecutor arrived one morning to discuss my case. He gave me a long speech and listed the names of fifty people. He wanted me to testify against them or give them information that would indict them. I told him I knew of a safehouse where the devices are stored that would incriminate his targets. He agreed to let me out with police protection so I could lead them to the spot. It was my chance. I knew there may not be another opportunity for me to escape so I gave guards the slip and drove away using a prison escort vehicle. After driving along the freeway for seventeen hours, I finally halted at a rest area and gave

Dustin a call. The hacker was pleased to see I had escaped and promised to supply me with an escape kit. He prepared false identities and unmarked bills for me and dropped it at a pre-planned location.

All I was hungry for was information.

Tuning in to the car's radio was so jarring that I could hardly drive. The newscaster talking about U.S. troops in Iraq- I had expected this but to see the invasion begin so soon was nerve-racking. There was another war in Afghanistan. I shook my head. I had dropped off the grid for barely two years. How could America have entered into war with two harmless nations? If this news was shocking to me, I don't know what word to use to describe my surprise when I drove to a contact's office in New York City.

The skyline was different. Two buildings were missing! Yes, the towers were indeed gone. Vanished. The realization of what terror unfolded on the fateful day of September 2001 dawned upon me. The City had lost its glory. The yellow cab driver who was speeding through the streets of Manhattan frowned at my bewilderment. He said it happened a long time that terrorists hijacked a plane and destroyed the Twin Towers.

I immediately contacted an officer who worked in the CIA and begged him to apprise me of the results of the investigation. He confided in me that the official story the government told the American people was a coverup. The Agency official believed the World Trade Centers were brought down by controlled demolition. He went on to explain how another airplane supposedly crashed in Shanksville on the morning of September 11, 2001 but that too was a mere cover story. The Flight 93 that, according to the government's story went down in Shanksville, actually landed in Cleveland Hopkins Airport due to a bomb threat. But prior to that, Cleveland Hopkins Airport was evacuated, because there were rumors that a hijacked plane was going to land. The airport authorities hurriedly evacuated the planes, which included Delta 1989 that landed in Cleveland at 10:10. Authorities searched Delta 1989 for over two hours, and passengers were questioned individually.

Flight 93 landed at Cleveland at approximately 10:45, but was evacuated at eleven o'clock. According to CIA's inside story, some of the passengers of those airplanes were escorted to the FAA headquarters while others were taken to the NASA Glenn Research Center that was located near the west end of the airport. Until today, most of the passengers who were evacuated from those planes were never found. I was sure they were being kept somewhere safe, like witness protection, because I couldn't imagine that the U.S. government would kidnap or kill its own citizens.

I wanted to investigate the events of that fateful day one piece at a time but first, I felt it was important to study the rubble from the WTC. The CIA contact had no doubt it was controlled demolition that brought the towers down, but I didn't want to believe him at first. He then gave me the address of a dumpsite. The debris from the Twin Towers were being stored there for investigation. I contacted Dustin and had him send a pack of lab materials to me. I was going to go to the site myself and find out what had caused the buildings to collapse.

I wanted to believe in the official version of the Twin Tower's destruction but when I watched the videos of the twin tower collapse several times, it seemed more obvious that something other than a passenger plane caused it to collapse. The impact of the supposed planes and the damage caused by fire was extremely random and uneven, but somehow the destruction of the buildings was incredibly symmetrical. In the video, the top of the North Tower seems to telescope effortlessly down into the intact portion of the building and the collapse remains symmetrical from start to finish. The World Trade Center was a 110-story building. Upon impact the tower came crashing down. Why wasn't there a massive pile on the floor? There should have been a lot of rubble from a 110-story building that contained ninety-thousand tons of concrete. If it was a demolition, then someone must have placed thousands of explosives on the columns and beams and then detonated them in a precise sequence.

My contact in the CIA told me the reason it took firefighters three months to put out the fire was because of the explosives that were used to destroy the towers. I remembered the truckloads of explosives that had shipped in to the New York harbor in 2000. I was on my way to intercept the dynamite when I was ambushed and arrested and later framed for acts of terrorism. I suspected Cynthia's father. He was directly responsible for bringing in the dynamite to the City right after the November 2000 presidential election was concluded.

My heart was torn with anguish. Thousands of innocent civilians- hardworking Americans who did no other crime than to go to work on time- thousands suffered a painful death in the inferno of the WTC. And the cowards who were responsible for it were profiting from the tragedy.

No, the criminals must never get away with the murder of so many Americans. I was going to bring them to justice; but first I wanted to collect evidence of the actual crime. I knew the explosive used in controlled demolition is hard to extinguish because they contain their own source of oxygen allowing them to burn under water. So, even though firefighters were pouring water constantly over the WTC debris, it wasn't helping. A member of the Uniformed Firefighters Association said that they pumped so much water in there as

though they were creating a giant lake. This suggested that there were demolition explosives planted in the Twin Towers, but I wanted to see the physical proof.

The dumpsite in New Jersey was being guarded by private security personnel. I dressed up as a maintenance worker and slipped in unnoticed. There were tons of rubble packed inside storage boxes so I got to work right away. I collected samples of the debris and tested them for demolition materials.

I knew that controlled demolitions left behind a lot of evidence, but it seemed that whoever carried it out didn't want the debris to be found. The dumpsite I was scouring was nearly cleared out. A log book noted that cleanup crews had already shipped about 99 percent of the structural steel off to China as scrap metal. I became more intrigued by the cover-ups. The person responsible for the Twin Tower attacks was eager to clear out the crime scene. I salvaged whatever I could from the eleven truckloads that remained and sent them to several trusted scientists for closer inspection.

I wired one million dollars to a private lab in London where a group of scientists had agreed to examine the rubble of the WTC. After examining the dust from the World Trade Center explosions, they found small gray chips of uninvited and partially ignited nanothermite proving the CIA's theory that the Twin Towers were brought down by controlled demolitions. These scientists explained why the buildings fell symmetrically down through their centers; it was because the explosives were carefully timed by computers and cut through the core of the structure.

Dustin conducted his own research on the type of explosives that were used to crush the towers. He discovered that nano thermite was indeed used in the demolition. It was also known as super thermite; a mixture of ultrafine aluminum and iron oxide developed at highly advanced national security labs like Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos. The material explodes very quickly. These substances release enormous amount of heat, which would account for the pools of molten steel and red-hot beams and columns in the debris piles.

There was not much I could do with my newfound knowledge. I asked Dustin to publish my research on the internet. I contacted several news agencies and asked them to print my article about the real events on September 11, 2001. Most media outlets expressed incredulity. They refused to believe that the Twin Towers were brought down by controlled demolition. The airplane hitting it was a far popular story which no one wanted to let go of. I still believed there would be some people present in America who were curious to find out the truth, so I made my research available online, hoping someone would read it and spread the truth.

Having discovered that the Twin Tower and Pentagon attacks were not the work of foreign terrorists, I began to wonder why the United States was engaged in a war with Iraq and Afghanistan. Surely Iraqi farmers did not plant those dynamites in the World Trade Center. I told my hacker friend that I had to go to the two countries that America invaded and find out what the U.S. military was after. Dustin hacked into the camera of an unmanned military surveillance plane that allowed me to have eyes over the war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. Dozens of oil drilling projects were taking place in Basra and Baghdad. British Petroleum along with five other oil production companies had already seized Iraqi oil fields and were using free labor to make money.

The countries America had invaded were in miserable condition. From my bird's eye view, I witnessed American forces arresting and shuttling thousands of Iraqi civilians inside the army camps. I wanted to know what was really going on inside the barbed wire fences, so I dressed as military police and entered the prison known as the Hard-Site of Abu Ghraib. Members of the 320th MP Battalion were guarding a group of prisoners. I slipped past them and began to take pictures of the surrounding cells. Painful shrieks and wailing could be heard all around. A military intelligence officer told me these people may be terrorists so they were interrogating them. I used my hidden camera to capture a few images of what was going on.

The things I saw were terrible. The images were even more grisly. In every cell that I entered, there were American soldiers punching and kicking Iraqi detainees, jumping on their naked bodies. It was like a scene from an orgy. All the inmates were kept naked, while the soldiers forcibly arranged male detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing and videotaping. Some of the detainees had dog chains strapped around their necks while military dogs without muzzles were frightening and biting them. The torture was so widespread that I didn't know how to put a stop to them. I brought the memory card with all the graphic pictures and emailed a copy to several news media.

It was early 2004 when a few American newspapers agreed to publish the news about the prisoner abuse. Only a handful of pictures that I sent them got printed on the first page. But that was enough to send shock waves across the world. Abu Ghraib became a household name and many law-abiding Americans were disgusted by the actions of their soldiers. Protests erupted in Bali, London and Paris. The U.S. military conducted several criminal investigations against the perpetrators but only a handful of men were punished.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were largely political moves carried out by several influential members of the US Senate. I tried to identify the individuals who were instrumental in initiating the two wars and came across seven Washington based bureaucrats.

They all had one thing in common: a lifetime membership to an elite club called the Council. One member of the Council had defected months earlier and was trying to leak several classified documents to the FBI but died under mysterious conditions.

I managed to recover parts of the memo and deciphered it with the help of Dustin. It seemed that the Council had worked out a detailed outline on how to invade Iran, which was incidentally the world's fourth largest oil producer. But according to the document, a handful members of the Council was against the plan. They argued that invading Iran would be disastrous since it had three times the population of Iraq and was five times the size. The disagreement spewed chaos and caused a few high senior members to defect from the Council.

Cynthia's stepfather was a low-ranking member of the Council and according to another member who divested from the group, Richard had been vehemently against the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. He had argued that Iraqi government was more than happy to share their oil with American and British oil companies and invading them was unnecessary. However, Richard had advocated for an attack on Pakistan. The Council members disregarded his opinion and went forth with the original attack plans. They used a ruse to attack Afghanistan and had officials at the State Department accuse Afghans of harboring an obscure terrorist by the name of Osama bin Laden.

Using this pretext, the Council could legally invade Kabul and build a gas pipeline that would connect to the central Pakistani area of Multan. Months before the September 11, 2001 attacks, senior Council members met with Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister to discuss the pipeline. In April, they signed a multi-billion-dollar contract for the pipelines that would start from Turkmenistan, go across Afghanistan and Pakistan and finally deposit rich gas to Mumbai, India, where Enron and Exxon already had functioning power plants. It was a convenient business venture but one that came at a price: human lives would be sacrificed to line their pockets with wealth. The Trans-Afghanistan oil and gas pipeline transported the world's biggest energy reserves and Enron, that had invested three billion dollars for a power plant near Mumbai was receiving cheap supply of gas from Turkmenistan via the pipeline through Afghanistan.

I was locked in prison for most of that year and failed to prevent the war from taking place. In Washington D.C., the Council members reigned supreme and used their wealth to influence policy changes that benefited their companies. If I had known about the Council sooner, I might have been able to reason with the honest politicians in Washington who had America's best interest at heart.

It would be after another three years that I would be able to identify all the members of the Council and expose them to the law enforcement authorities but damage had been done by then. Two nations were nearly annihilated by the military invasion. It was a tragedy cloaked in deception. Officials at the CIA, the DIA, the NRO and the NSA quietly removed the Council members from the public and were careful not to expose the harsh truth to the American people. I felt it was unfortunate that many Americans held President Bush personally responsible for the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and blamed their president for the economic crisis when it was members of the Council who were the architect of the two wars. Five of the members who were major shareholders of DragonOIL, Bp, CP, Exxon, UCol and Shell- all the oil companies that were drilling for petrol in Iraq- were later arrested and imprisoned on tax evasion charges.

So much had taken place within the span of four years that I was still reeling from shock and confusion. Dozens of senior lawmakers and brilliant politicians who had sworn allegiance to the Council were in CIA holding cells but I had hundreds of unanswered questions. I finally made the dreaded trip and spoke to one of the elderly bureaucrats who was a shareholder at a gas company. I wanted to know what had driven the Council to take such drastic measures as to invade countries that had never supported terrorist activities.

The man was forthright in his answers. He claimed to be a patriot and was convinced that the Afghan pipelines were vital to US interests because it enabled America to take over the control of the oil and gas that were stored in the former Soviet republics. Twenty five percent of the world oil consumption was done by the United States, which relied heavily on foreign oil. The Council had America's best interest at heart, he told me, and the members did not lead the country into the Afghanistan and Iraq war for merely personal financial benefits.

I wonder what would have happened if I didn't expose the photos. For how many years would the innocent Iraqi civilians remained in the torture site? I didn't want to think about it too much. It brought back memories from my own confinement during the two years I was kidnapped by Richard's henchmen. Whether Cynthia agreed to help me or not, I was determined to bring Richard and the remaining Council members to justice.

June, 2003

Daniel Marshall was waiting beside the pavement when I stepped out of my safehouse a week later.

I recognized the tall FBI Intelligence Analyst at once. His sandy pepper hair and heavy eyes were discernable.

"What brings you here?" I asked the Bureau agent.

Marshall handed me a paper bag. "I got the forensics you were looking for. We have a match."

“You lost me there, Dan,” I said. “I don’t remember asking you to bring any forensic report.”

“Right,” the FBI analyst replied. “You didn’t ask, but I did some digging on my own. And I found out who was really behind the war in Chechnya. I identified the man who instigated the whole affair.”

“Who was it?”

“The CIA liaison at the Bureau confirmed that the entire façade was carried out by a team of black ops mercenaries, professing loyalty to your daddy-in-law.”

“What?” I was stunned to hear that.

“Oh, come on, dude. Are you really surprised?” Daniel Marshall said sarcastically. “That man is evil. I am astounded that you are still in a relationship with her.”

“Cynthia left me, Dan. She thinks I am being biased about her stepfather. She believes Richard is innocent.”

“Well, I can tell you this: Richard is no innocent lamb.” The FBI Intelligence Analyst nodded sadly. “I found detailed paper trail proving he was directly responsible for the attacks in the North Caucasus region. Since late 1999 and early 2000, Richard sent emissaries to the Russian border and ordered his men to carry out a series of attack there in order to inflict heavy Russian casualties and challenge Russian political control over Chechnya for several years. His agenda was to destabilize Russia and, in the process, wipe out the entire population of Chechnya.”

“You are talking about the Russian intervention in Chechnya in 2000?” I clarified. “How was it Richard’s doing? It looked as though Russian forces moved in after Chechen rebels made some absurd demands.”

“I was about to explain that,” Daniel Marshall said patiently. “The Russian president’s intelligence secretary is in charge of the entire intelligence bureau. He was paid a huge sum by Richard several years ago, and has been receiving regular monetary handouts since then.”

“Since when?”

“Richard paid the Russian president’s intelligence secretary since 1985. He was planted in your country by this Austrian criminal for over a decade, and Richard was hoping to use him to destabilize the Soviet Union and cause it to collapse.”

“How do you know Richard planted that spy in Moscow?”

Daniel Marshall laughed humorlessly. “Because both the CIA and the FBI knew about Richard’s extracurricular activities. We let him siphon some money to Moscow illegally at that time, because the United States government actually wanted the Soviet Union to collapse. But Richard went out of control after that, and he started to order his double agent to sabotage the entire Russian government and ultimately make the KGB defunct.”

“Why would Richard try so hard to destroy the Soviet Union?”

“He wanted power over the region. The Soviet Union was too vast, too powerful, so he collapsed it from the inside and put a puppet in the president’s seat. A simple man who had no choice but to obey everything Richard told him. That is how, as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, Richard forced the Russian president to invade and bombard Grozny. His orders were to kill one million civilians in Chechnya.”

“One million?” I exclaimed. “That is the entire population.”

“I know,” the FBI Intelligence Analyst said. “Richard wanted to eliminate the entire population and planned to use Russian soldiers to do it. We have proof that he sent shipment of armaments in 1994 to Dagestan and ordered his mercenaries to make sure not a soul survives in the North Caucasus region. He and his men managed to kill nearly a hundred thousand men, women and children, but luckily the Russian government suspected that they were being controlled by a foreign agent, and agreed to a truce with the Chechen leadership.”

“How did Richard manipulate the entire Russian armed force into believing that Chechens were their enemy?”

“He didn’t have to worry about anyone else in the government. Richard made sure the mentally imbalanced and foolish Russian president remained in power from 1991, so that he could make him do or say anything at any time. He wanted to give maximum bloodshed in Russia, killing all intelligent men, and army officers, so that he and his mercenary criminals could control the rest of the weakened population.”

I began to interrupt him. “The Russian Federation is not easy to control.”

“After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia became a very weak nation; almost like a Third World war-torn country so it was easy for Richard to take advantage of the fragile political system and forcibly place a dumb leader in power. Then he made them kill their own people until they had no power to defend themselves. Because it was Richard and his NSA black ops men who were controlling everything, by activating several corrupt double agents who were on his payroll. Those few Russian inside men were willing to become traitors and agreed to sell their country for exchange of some dollars and get into unnecessary wars.”

I wondered aloud. "How did he manage the logistics of this war?"

"If you know Richard at all, then you know he can be very resourceful. He had hired a huge mercenary group who did all the dirty work, bribing Kremlin deputies, threatening senior political leaders, and controlling which locations the army needed to attack, and when mortar and rocket shells were detonated. That's how he managed to get 100,000 innocent Chechen civilians killed." The FBI intelligence analyst looked disappointed.

I realized the man was exhausted so I quickly bade him farewell and got into a taxi cab.

Since 1979, I have been serving Richard most loyally. I trusted and loved him like a father, and obeyed all his orders. He would often send me to arrest and capture his enemies, and sometimes, he would ask me to find out where his rivals were hiding and seize all their wealth and weapons. I would unhesitatingly do everything Richard asked, because I wanted him to be happy. I loved his daughter Cynthia, and I wanted him to give his approval for our marriage.

Richard would send me to remote regions of Africa and South America and tell me to destroy mining and drug business of his enemies. I would speedily obey his instructions and bring all their money over to him. I would often capture other businessmen and hand them over to Richard, but I later found out that Richard was using me to neutralize all his rival entrepreneurs. Cynthia's stepfather would use the money I brought for him and hire criminals to hurt and assault my family. I never suspected that he was trying to use me to carry out illegal operations, and I happily listened to everything he told me. It was many years later that I found out that Richard had tortured those men I captured, and often killed them after interrogation, in order to find out all the details about their business ventures. It was this way that Richard earned billions of dollars, and he was then able to use those money to hire pimps to kidnap my adopted sister and sell her to international sex traffickers.

I feel sad to think that I single-handedly made Richard and his mercenaries the most powerful group in the world by getting them everything they needed to become influential. I did hundreds of missions for him, and even identified and eliminated many of his other employees who tried to double cross him. One after another, I worked hard to bring down rival gangs and Eastern European terrorist groups so that Richard could remain in power.

I travelled all over Europe, Germany, England and Russia and helped Richard expand his kingdom across continents, until he was able to become the most powerful man in the world without anyone to oppose him.

I knew that Richard had been responsible for the assassination of several world leaders, including Pakistan's president in 1980, and also two Russian leaders within the span of one year. However, I was still unaware of how much damage the old man was able to do, until I met a man who was working in the MI6. His name was Lloyd, and he was British.

Lloyd had been working in the British intelligence services since he was nineteen years old, and he helped me with several of my own missions when I was in England. His first role was as an undercover officer covering Eastern Europe. His job involved meeting agent runners and collecting intelligence they had gathered from their sources, and corroborating their reports.

Fairly soon, Lloyd found himself being promoted to MI6 London office where he took a senior Surveillance Officer role in charge of the Counter-Terrorism sector in Central Asia.

When Lloyd met me in London, he said he was the new director of the Cyber Security team and spend a lot of his time briefing Ministers, senior officials and other intelligence services.

I congratulated him and asked Lloyd what his main job was at MI6.

Lloyd replied. "As a recruit, I trained to become an agent runner so that helped me a lot in advancing through my career."

"What is an agent runner?" I asked.

"Oh, in England, someone who recruits and runs agents is known as the agent runner." Lloyd responded. "In this role, I work in counter-proliferation. It is a very demanding task, but it gave me the opportunity to travel overseas, meet existing agents and develop new contacts."

"That sounds interesting," I commented.

"Yes," Lloyd agreed. "However, one of the most interesting information I had recently come across was very shocking to me."

"What information did you find out?" I asked the British officer.

"It was about an incident that happened in November of 1979, only several months after you and Richard became acquainted."

Lloyd began to speak slowly. "Did you know that after you and Richard became friends, he had attacked the Moslem holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia?"

"Why did he do that?" I asked. "I had no idea about this incident."

"It was probably to take revenge on you. Think about it. What did you do at that time to make Richard so angry?"

"I did not do anything wrong, Lloyd. I only began to have an affair with his daughter Cynthia, and we would sleep together, but Richard disapproved of this relationship."

"Well, that makes sense," Lloyd observed. "He did get insane if anyone slept with his daughter. So, Richard decided to take revenge and hired around six hundred men and told them to overthrow the Saudi Arabian government by killing the king. The mercenaries were ordered to take over the monarchy and declare themselves the rulers of an Islamic state, and then do a lot of terrorism and bombings and blame it on Moslems."

"It sounds a lot like the ISIS group Richard and his Italian friends had funded recently," I observed. "They carry out mass killings and make videos about murdering and raping civilians, and they claim to be followers of Arabic religion."

"Richard probably had planned the same thing when he ordered his operatives to dress up as insurgents and seize the control of the Grand Mosque of Mecca during November and December 1979. His criminals pretended to be extremist insurgents and tried to overthrow of the House of Saud by assassinating the king."

"Richard wanted to kill the Saudi Arabian king?" I repeated in horror.

"Yes, he ordered his mercenaries to shoot the king when he came to pray in the Grand Mosque, and they terrorist were also told to take hostages from among the worshippers and execute them."

"But Richard did not succeed, right?"

"Fortunately, he failed, because after the hijackers began to kill hundreds of Saudi Arabian police, the Saudi king requested the help of French GIGN operatives, and a squad of British commandos. I was one of the member of the rescue team, and one of the things I noticed when we arrived in Saudi Arabia, was that the criminals who held worshippers as hostages were killing innocent people inside the Mosque grounds."

"Why were you surprised by this?"

"Because that was when I realized that those terrorists were not Arabs or Moslems." Lloyd explained. "Moslems respect the Grand Mosque of Mecca as a sanctuary. They never kill or wound anyone in the city because Islam outlawed any violence within the perimeter of Mecca, and especially inside the Mosque of Ka'ba, to the extent that small plants cannot be uprooted nor are animals are permitted to be slaughtered or killed."

"But did you have actual proof that the hijackers were employees of Richard's mercenary group?" I asked.

"After French operatives and British commandos assisted the Saudi forces and Saudi Intelligence, I personally interrogated several hijackers when they were captured." The British intelligence officer replied. "They admitted that Richard's chief of staff hired them to pretend to be Moslem and seize the Grand Mosque and overthrow the Saudi kingdom. And the leader was paid fifty million dollars to pose as a spiritual leader, known as the anti-Christ Mehdi."

"That is strange," I commented. "The leader of the fake terrorist group called ISIS also calls himself the Mehdi Anti-Christ. Richard and his employees are still trying to make the same terrorist organization and kill innocent people posing as Moslems."

I remembered the incident in Saudi Arabia only vaguely, because I was very young, and at that time of my life, I trusted Richard completely.

The hostage crisis inside a holy city in Saudi Arabia shocked the entire world, and people were horrified to see that several hundred people had died in the shootout, and thousands of innocent people were injured. It was the bloodiest battle that ever took place in the holy sanctuary of Abraham. Since the time of Abraham, thousands of years ago, the patch of desert land in Mecca was considered a holy place, where all lives were sacred, and not even the enemy was killed or tortured within its boundaries, but the mercenaries Richards and his men had hired were determined to destroy the last strongholds of peace in the world, and cause chaos for the sake of anarchy.

Cynthia's stepfather began to despise me and hate my country ever since 1978, when I first met his daughter and began to have a love-affair with her. Richard knew about the Russian woman's family, who I considered my own, and his spies saw me frequenting the Russian woman's house and spend time with her husband and children. Although the woman was Orthodox Russian, her husband was a Moslem man from East Pakistan, and they both treated me like their own son. I loved that family very much, and Richard began to believe that I was related to them somehow.

When he saw me spending quality time with my adopted family, and he realized how much I loved them, he decided to destroy Islam. I thought Richard was being absurd, because I was not connected with their religion, and I did not know anything about Islam, and neither was I ever interested in learning about religion.

I was a Russian boy, who grew up in the Soviet era, and our nation was not like the Germans. We did not hate any particular faith or culture, like the Germans did by targeting the Jews of Europe during the World War. I did not understand why Richard was obsessed with destroying Russia, and why he was so desperate to frame Moslems for crimes. I did not want to believe that it had something to do with me, but it was a mournful thought.

However, Cynthia's stepfather was an Austrian man, who himself was responsible for a lot of war crimes, so I was too surprised to see that he was targeting a religion so viciously. During World War Two, the Germans began to kill Jews indiscriminately, and they wanted the whole world to hate the Jews as well, so they created propaganda ministries to make and distribute false news and movies about the Jewish population. Richard was doing the same thing with Russians and Moslems, since 1978. That was when he began to create dozens of terrorist organizations in Africa, Asia, Pakistan, Lebanon, North Africa, Eastern Europe, Sudan and Somalia. His mercenaries posed as Arab or African fighters, and their only job was to carry out bombings and other heinous crimes, and frame Moslems for it. They were ordered to blow up hospitals and schools, and claim that Alla told them to do it. They had the task of making Islam look like a bad religion, and in order to convince people of that, those Eastern European and Italian gangsters would dress up in Arabic clothes, and rape and kill civilians, and they announced it to the media that their religion ordered them to kill all civilians in the world.

Richard somehow thought that if he managed to taint and destroy the Moslem religion, then I would feel pained, and become very sad. This is why he continued to make fake terrorist organizations one after the other, until he achieved murdering millions of innocent people in Iraq, Chechnya, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Myanmar.

January 2007

It was a hectic week for me. It was a hectic week for me. My friend Dustin had been assisting me with several parallel investigations and one his close contact at the NASA's satellite center had been cooperating with us and providing us with live geospatial satellite feed. When I entered Dustin's computer lab that afternoon, the NASA data scientist was busy at work.

"Hello, Kyle," I greeted him.

Kyle turned in his swivel chair and waved. He told me he found something interesting in his satellite images.

"What did you find?" I asked him.

"I located a group of foreign military ships near the Russian border. I also noticed that a French anti-submarine aircraft was circling the area at a low altitude since yesterday."

"What does that mean?"

Kyle shrugged his shoulders and ate hungrily from a bag of potato chips.

"I am really worried about Russia," I told him. "What if Richard does not stop this madness? He seems determined to attack the Russian Federation again and again."

Kyle had been working at the NASA's Kendall Space Flight Center for over ten years, and he was now a full-time employee at the U.S. Missile Defense Agency. He knew I was always concerned about the safety of the Russian Federation so he would often inform me of any anomalies he detected in the region.

"You don't have to worry about Russia anymore," Kyle said dismissively. "It is a powerful country that can withstand any external attack. The only way Richard can invade that country is if he succeeds in overthrowing the present leader and replacing him with another puppet and influence Kremlin from the inside."

"How would he ever achieve that?" I marveled. "Russian people are smart. They would not allow an imposter to ruin the nation anymore."

Kyle scrolled through his computer screen. "Well, according to the declassified CIA archives, Richard accomplished this feat back in 1990, after he successfully dissolved the Soviet Union and put a peasant in the president's seat. That man was mentally impaired and he had no choice but to obey everything Richard ordered him. That man was in office until December of 1999, and in those few years, Richard used his NSA and CIA black ops resources to control him and make him invade Chechnya and kill thousands of innocent Chechen civilians and ethnic Russians."

"How are you so certain that Richard was personally responsible for starting the first Chechen war in Russia?"

"We found paper trails, showing he wired millions of rubles to senior aides of the president, and those men in turn, persuaded the Russian leader to invade Chechnya. Trust me, if Richard wants to invade Russia again, or destroy the nation, he will not try to bomb the cities, because Russia has a powerful arsenal that is capable of destroying any foreign belligerent faction. No, if he does try again, it will be to replace the sitting president with one of his hired men."

"But Russians would not allow an imposter to take over the country's leadership." I protested.

"Well, the man who Richard will nominate for this position would be a native Russian who outwardly will display false and flowery patriotism, and claim to love his motherland, while he will allow any foreign agents to infiltrate and destroy the nation."

"I don't want to believe Richard is so powerful."

"Well, you should start believing it, because you may be too young to remember it, but I was a rookie officer at the CIA when the Soviet leader decided to send his army into Afghanistan."

"You are talking about the 1979 war?" I asked.

The U.S. Missile Defense Agency employee nodded. "Yes, and at first, the United States did not want to get involved in that terrible mess, and meddle in between the Afghans and the Soviets, but soon, reliable intel came in that showed that some third party was paying millions of dollars to the Afghan war lords, and the drug merchants, who were in turn buying illegal weapons, and were also harassing Afghan civilians and killing Soviet soldiers. Then, we decided to intervene and began to train some Mujahideen, because at that time, the Mujahideen were more reasonable and less violent. Of course, at that time, we did not know who was paying the Afghan war lords. Only after several years, did the State Department discover that it was Richard's money that was funding the Afghan war lords."

"Richard was involved in so many past conflicts?"

"He was." Kyle confirmed. "But what was most dreadful was how he ordered and paid some men in the Russian government to indiscriminately bomb Chechnya, and some sources told me that Richard ordered several Air Force bombers to make sure at least one million Chechens were killed. We didn't understand why he had this obsession of killing Chechens, but now that you mentioned your connection to Grozny, I guess it makes some sense now." Kyle spoke thoughtfully.

"I don't know anything about Grozny or Chechnya. I didn't even know I had family members there, but only that my mother was born there, and had relatives who lived in the cities of Chechnya." As I spoke, my voice trailed off.

It was a terribly depressing thought, knowing that my mother's homeland was destroyed because of me. Kyle was already busy with his computer so I quietly slipped away from his computer control room and hurried to my small apartment. I ran all the way to the upper floor and tried to hide my heavy tears from the people of the world. Why was I always the reason and cause for so much destruction? It made no sense why innocent people had to suffer because of my mistakes. If Richard was angry with me, he could just kill me, but why did he have to hurt the people in my motherland?

When I took my mother's body and had it buried in her family graveyard, I placed a small cross over it as a sign of respect, but my heart was heavy with sadness. I wanted to place the largest cross over the ground on which my dear mother's body was resting, but I didn't want to make it look too suspicious. However, this secret of mine was exposed.

I should never have removed my mother's remains and transferred them to Grozny. It proved to be a fatal mistake, because Richard had me followed and found out about my mother's origins. Then he vowed to destroy that land forever, and twice, he hired mercenaries to invade and attack the Russian border region and execute all civilians in Chechnya.

My mind felt numb in weariness and pain, and I felt so helpless that I went to the Icon's corner of my house and cried bitterly for a long time. If being alive meant I had to suffer so much sadness, then I didn't want to be alive anymore. I hoped I died soon, and I was even willing to be tortured to death in order to expiate from all my sins, all my faults, and all my great mistakes. I wanted to go to the streets and let some random assassin kill me so that my soul could be at peace.

I lost my soul saving the world.

I lost my body fighting the world.

April, 2007

I resumed my activity in combating international crime syndicates who were always itching to begin new wars. I learned of the existence of three weapons manufacturers who were preparing large shipments of arms to Europe and Asia. My informant who worked in Richard's office mailed me a coded message. The cryptic note mentioned that Cynthia's stepfather was making contact with the CEO of an arms manufacturer and was also meeting with the opposition leader in Pakistan. I decided to follow Richard myself to find out about his ulterior plans. I switched the identity of his chauffeur and replaced him with Dustin, while I dressed as the waiter in the restaurant he was headed to. I wired the utensils with listening devices and recorded the conversation Richard was having with his dinner partners.

A week earlier, I had received an urgent message via an international hotline. A State Duma deputy informed me that several American aircrafts were violating the state border of the Russian Federation and the RAF would not tolerate such breach of international airspace. However, the U.S. generals I corresponded with denied that American military was conducting any exercise in that area. He assumed the Russian intel was faulty but I knew there was another explanation for this. Someone was using American aircrafts to provoke a Russian response and this would in turn start a much-dreaded military confrontation.

I hastened to notify my contact at the GU that the American planes near their border were decoys, that were being used by a rogue Austrian-Hungarian man. The leadership of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces confirmed my statement and soon called off the seven Russian Su-27 fighter jets that had gone to intercept the American reconnaissance planes over the Black Sea. Once more, I was relieved to have averted a nuclear war but my patience was waning. How many more attempts would Richard make to spur the two great nations into war? His obsession with Russia was getting more and more pronounced by the day. I for once was tired of fighting and stopping wars but as I was soon going to find out, Cynthia's step father had other plans.

I remembered a flurry of gunshot. I returned covering fire to give myself time to escape. The air around me was filled with fragments of metal and fire. Rapid bursts of machine gun fire, I thought with horror. I threw myself into the grass and began crawling away. The shooter must have lost sight of me because the bullets were not flying towards me anymore. My mouth was filled with dirt as I pressed my body to the soft ground and increased the distance between myself and the assailants. But in the frenzy, I was unable to positively identify my attackers.

"It was a hit team, Dustin," I told the hacker after barely making out of the park alive. "They were waiting for me, execution style. I don't know how I managed to get away."

"You think *you* were the target?" The hacker sounded worried.

I nodded. "I want to question them. Can you hack into the park's cameras and find out which precinct took them?"

"Yeah, give me a minute," Dustin typed furiously and pulled up a red triangle on the map. "According to police reports, cops arrested the gunmen. One of the assailants was hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries."

"There were two shooters," I reminded him.

"Yes, the other one is in CIA custody. They are interrogating him."

"Text me the address of the Agency building," I told Dustin and headed to my car.

The Agency office building I arrived at was disguised a brokerage firm called Insurance Analytics. My NSA security pass got me past the front desk. I was escorted to the control center by an armed guard.

I paused by the multi display monitor in the room. A prisoner was being questioned, or rather shouted at in a very crude manner.

"Hey, Frank," I said, reading the guard's name from his identification tag. "Who are they beating up the holding cell?"

"The man who fired shots at you," the guard flattened his lips derisively. "He's getting what he deserved."

I squinted at the multi-angled surveillance footage from the interrogation room. Two men in Balaclava masks were using their knuckle dusters to pounce the prisoner repeatedly. I noticed blood dripping from his face.

"Where is he now?" I asked the guard.

"We're holding him at our underground holding cell. He's being interrogated as we speak." He zoomed one of the videos. "Here, this screen is giving live feed from the questioning cell."

"Did the Agency identify him yet?"

"Yes, actually it's interesting what they found. The kid is Russian. But as to what or who he's affiliated with, we have no idea."

I studied the slouched figure. Only the left side of his face was visible on camera, but I knew I had seen the copper haired stout youth before.

I looked at the SPS officer. "Give me the code of this elevator. I'm going in."

"Where?" The Security Protective Service officer stood his ground. "My job is to ensure the prisoner is secure."

"Dammit, I need to talk to him." I snapped so loudly that he took a step back. "Now."

I knew SPS existed to protect CIA personnel, facilities and detainees but they did not have the authority to prevent me from interviewing a prisoner.

I took the magnetically coded card from the SPS officer and inserted it into a reader in the elevator control panel. Access to the underground floors were restricted to regular operatives.

I located the interrogation room and ordered the two men to leave.

The prisoner looked severely injured.

I could feel tears flooding my eyes when I saw his pitiable state. Russophobe conspiracist at the American intelligence agencies took their political rationality to its logical conclusion, and blamed everything that went wrong in the western hemisphere on the KGB. This allowed them to somewhat demonize the Russian population and treat prisoners from the place with utter contempt.

The CIA interrogators had done a thorough job. Two of the prisoner's front teeth were missing. One was broken. His nose was nearly smashed. He was bleeding heavily from his right eye. I didn't know if his vision was impaired.

I identified myself. When he heard my voice, he raised his face.

He looked familiar! Then I remembered-

It was early 1970s.

I was living inside a dilapidated building that housed over fifty orphans.

Life was is a state of obsolescence.

Over a year had passed since I reluctantly began to call this orphanage my home. My thirteenth birthday was on the horizon and I was eager for life to change for me. I was despondent, miserable and angry. Nothing was happening the way I wanted it to be. Hunger was my constant companion.

It was Sunday. I knew there would be a fair three kilometers west of my location. I didn't have any money at all, but the thought of being inside an expansive open market made me restless. I gathered all my warm clothed and dressed myself in layers. Then I set off on my quest.

When I arrived at the fair, local farmers and bakers were setting up small makeshift tents over the icy ground. I saw a man hauling a covered cart. I hurried beside him, eagerly helping him push the wheeled cart ahead of other. There I saw the most delightful items wrapped in paper: emerald colored *bublik*, mounds of *kulich*, the traditional Eastern Orthodox bread as well as meat filled *pirozhki*. After my mother died, I have never seen such rich food. I could smell the sweet fragrance of the bread wafting around me and couldn't help but remember the days of forgotten childhood in London. I always had so much to eat. In my primary school, each student would get individual loaf of bread. Often, the schoolmaster would offer us biscuits and shortcake. I never had to spend a day in hunger. But once I was sent away from London, food had become a luxury.

Now, in the freezing Russian village, I stood eagerly around the food stalls, hoping someone would offer me a piece of bread or a chunk of dried fish. I waited for hours. I loitered in the fair until it was evening. Afraid that it will get dark, I mustered enough courage to approach a middle-aged man who was selling loaves of bread. I asked him to give me a small piece of bread, explaining that I had no cash with me but he spat curses at me and warned me to stay away.

I felt terrible to be treated in such boorish way. The baker's belittlement angered me enough to make me more desperate. I was hungry and had waited all day for a piece of bread. Now, I would take what I had come for. I was quite unwilling to return to the orphanage empty handed. I prepared to steal a loaf of bread when the man looked away. I perched on my toes, watching anxiously.

I had never before considered taking an item without the owner's permission for that is how my beloved mother raised me, but I wish I could describe how I was feeling. Hunger was a terrible thing, and if one had not felt it, then I don't think I can ever explain how dreadfully painful it can be. I was a teenager, on the verge of starvation. Cold and solitude were my full-time enemies. Horror leered at me from all around. Hunger was threatening to be my executioner.

As the evening sky darkened, I noticed the baker packing his goods away. This was the chance I had been waiting for. I crouched low and pretended to sweep rubbish off the floor. Then I seized a long piece of bread and hid it inside my jacket. It was a narrow loaf, around ten centimeters long. I was about to head back to the orphanage when I remembered my friends and young comrades who were also suffering from unbearable hunger. They too had nothing decent to eat. One thin loaf of bread would have been sufficient for me, but not enough for all of us. It would have been cruel to enjoy the bread by myself so I went back to steal five more pieces of bread. I imagined we could cut each into ten medium slices and all fifty children would be able to share it.

This time, it was harder to get near the bread cart. The owner had packed it into neat piles inside his wheeled cart and was covering it with a sheet. I approached from the rear, but the man looked at me suspiciously. I wondered if he noticed there was a loaf missing already. I slipped my hand inside the sheet and noiselessly picked up two more loaves of bread. Suddenly the cart owner's friend who was behind me shouted. He saw me stealing the bread and grabbed me by my jacket collar and dragged me to the baker. The held me down and searched my jacket pockets. When the man saw I had taken five loaves of bread, he began to kick me and scream ferociously. The other store owners came and cursed me and snatched the bread from my hand. They dragged me by the hair and dumped me by the side of the road before leaving with their cart. My eyes burned with hot tears. I don't know what hurt more; the pain from their beatings and heavy blows or the humiliation of being called the vilest names under the sun. The men roared in my ear. They called me a bastard, a thief, a faggot and so many other things I didn't even understand. I couldn't tell what was worse: the pain of being hungry, the insult of having to live in starvation or to be treated worse than an animal.

Those men who beat me didn't understand that the loaf of bread was my future. I had been waiting for it for hours. I spend the entire morning daydreaming about returning to the orphanage, my arms laden with soft bread. Now, I was an ultimate failure. I felt

worse because for a brief moment, there was hope left. For a few minutes, I had believed I had succeeded and that made the pain so much worse. Everything was taken away from me. I was shaking from anger and pain. My entire body was aching. My head throbbed steadily. I shook so violently that my teeth chattered. Then before I could stop myself, I dissolved in tears.

It had been a long time that I had been beaten by father. As a boy, he would punish me most severely for the slightest dereliction and prevent me from partaking meals. If I got home late from school, my father would beat me with his belt or whatever utensil he could find in the kitchen. He would order me not to eat and also order my mother not to give me anything. If she disobeyed him and attempted to slip a bowl of porridge into my room, he would beat her so severely and smash her head against the wall that I would fear she might not survive. But that was long ago. I had thought that those days of torment would never return, but I was wrong. This day, as I was once more branded as an evil child and humiliated, those childhood memories returned. The pain came flowing down, afresh.

I hugged the icy ground and wept hysterically. I cursed myself. I cursed my dreadful life. I cursed my unkind fate. I didn't know who to call in this hour of bitter helplessness. I wailed for my mother. I called out to her. Why did she leave me to face this dreadful world alone? Why couldn't she be alive for me? In a frenzy of desperate rage, I felt the insane urgency to die. I decided to stay out into the cold all night until I froze to death. There was a lake nearby. I did not know how to swim so I considered leaping into the freezing waters and drown. I wanted god to kill me. I screamed my prayers aloud as I told god I didn't want to live in this world, and since I couldn't take my own life, I demanded he take my soul away at once. I never wished for anything so ardently in my life. I'd never prayed so earnestly to die because I knew I would be better off living with God.

Even if I had to kill myself, it would be worth it. No matter how angry god became with me for killing myself, he could never hate me as much as these men despised me. I was sure that no matter how terrible the afterlife was, it could never be nearly as desolate or painful as this life I was living in. I realized I was better off dead and buried- forgotten by all those who saw me as a burden, who considered me an irrelevant dirt on the corner of a side street.

I meant nothing to anyone. My mother was no longer in this world. She was the only human being who had loved me unconditionally. To everyone else, I was unwanted, unloved, unneeded. They were disgusted by my existence. Without me, they would be happier. The world would be better off without me.

With fresh pang of regret, I realized that I had never brought any happiness or good in the lives of those around me. I couldn't help my mother, who suffered to the bitter end. I had failed my peers at the orphanage and couldn't bring them even a stale loaf of bread. No, I had only brought pain and disappointment to my loved ones. Now, I no longer wanted to remain alive among strangers who disliked or pitied me.

It was nightfall. I stayed awake, weeping into the cold, starless night, waiting for death to come, begging god to let me die in peace. I do not remember falling asleep so I must have fainted. When I awoke, it was nearly dawn. Familiar faces were huddled over me. I felt a warm seeping into my hearts. My comrades were here. The children of the orphanage had found me! I was so weak and delirious that I was unable to walk. My body was in pain and I was shivering uncontrollably from high fever so the older children helped me walk back to the house. The orphans described how they had searched for me all night when they noticed my absence.

Once I was rested, my peers discovered that I had high fever. I was suffering from nausea and was unable to eat even a morsel. My temperature was not coming down. The children got worried. They didn't have any money to purchase medicine for me, anything that would lower my raging temperature. Some of my closest friends hid their puffed eyes from me. They didn't want me to see their tears. With a sinking heart, I knew they were fearing the worst; that I might die. They didn't want anything to happen to me because they knew I always tried to look after them. The next morning, my friend Dimitry had a visitor. His grandmother had come to visit him. He pulled her grandmother inside and begged her to buy me some medicine for my fever. The kind old woman felt my searing forehead and agreed. She hurried to a local store and bought painkillers and juice for me. My health improved dramatically after I took the medicine. I stayed hydrated for the next three days.

If it wasn't for Dimitry's grandmother, I would have most certainly ended up dying from infection, fever or starvation but my Russian friends saved me. Since that day, I felt renewed love towards the children of this Siberian orphanage. The camaraderie among children in my orphanage was astonishing. I belonged to them. They loved me like their own brother.

I woke up every morning and reminded myself that there were young hearts who loved me dearly and I would have to live on for them. I would have to grow up and try to give them a better life. Every time life frowned at me, I reminded myself that it would be selfish to die when there were helpless people around the world who were waiting for someone to save them or help them live agreeably another day.

The severity of the dread I had faced each day was enough to break the strongest heart but I had something that was far too durable for the Camp to destroy- I knew my mother had loved me, my friends at the orphanage cared about me. Despite the horror and miseries of my life, and having to wake up every morning to see the emotionless face of mechanical instructors who trained us to kill on command, I held on to the hope that I would survive this ordeal.

But I did not leave unscathed. Taking another human's life was more painful than one can ever imagine. Although the former colonel of the KGB black op unit assured us that the targets we were assigned in the elimination operations were professional criminals, my heart ached every time I had to squeeze the trigger. For me, it would have been so much easier if I could end my life rather than kill a fellow human being.

Inside the CIA interrogation cell, I gazed in wonder at the battered face before me. It *was* him.

The prisoner was none other than my dear friend Dimitry.

"Dima! It's really *you*?" My lips quivered as I tried to maintain my composure.

The man looked at me with his puffy eyes.

"How did you end up here?" I was bursting with curiosity. "What happened?"

"I will not speak to you," he spat out, before groaning in pain. "You are a traitor!"

My eyes widened so quickly that my facial muscles hurt. "What are you saying, Dima? I am your friend, remember? We were at the orphanage together. Your grandmother saved my life."

"You *were* my friend," Dimitry replied coldly. "Now, you are a traitor."

"Why do you say that?" Tears threatened to spill over my cheeks. My childhood friend hated me. I was stung with injury and anguish.

"They told us you were dead," Dimitry finally said. "That you died in prison after getting caught. But it was all a lie. I learned that when you left the orphanage, you trained to become a spy and came to this country to sell off the Motherland. Now, you serve the CIA and are betraying your own country. When we were children, I believed in you. You used to help us. And now, you are nothing but a slave to your American masters."

"Dima, whoever told you all this about me- they lied. Look at me!" I pleaded with my friend. "I haven't changed at all. I still love you and the other children who were at the orphanage. We were like brothers. Why do you hate me so much?"

"I don't hate you," Dimitry replied. He glanced at me with troubled eyes. "I pity you. You have fooled even yourself into believing you are righteous when all you do is serve your American benefactors."

I took a seat across his metal chair and peered into his face. "Okay, tell me, Dima, who told you all this about me?"

My friend sniffed audibly before finally replying. "I was sixteen when I left the orphanage for good. It was several months after you had disappeared. I didn't want to be there without you so I roamed in the streets, looking for work. Then I joined a security company to be a night guard. Everything was going on smoothly until one day, a man showed up at work. He spoke to me in broken Russian."

"Who was he?" I asked.

Dimitry shook his head. "He never told me his name. He was a bit short, wore very expensive suit and tie."

I wordlessly scrolled through my phone's photos and held it in front of him. "Is it the man?" I inquired, displaying a recent picture of Richard.

Dimitry's jaw dropped slightly. "Yes, but he had less gray hair."

"What did the man want from you?"

"He told me all about you," Dimitry said. "He said you were a traitor and was working for the American to kill Russian citizens."

"That's not true," I said. My voice became hoarse. "He was lying to you, Dima. The man you are talking about tried to destroy my life."

"He had proof," my friend insisted. "He showed us photos of you in America, living happily."

"What did he ask you to do, Dima?"

"He didn't have to ask! He said I could set things right and take revenge and then he took me to a training center. There were other children there from our orphanage. We were taught how to shoot, how to fight."

"What was Richard making you do?"

“He said our mission was to stop you,” Dimitry said dispassionately. “I volunteered to be on the strike team so I could kill you myself. That man told us about all the terrible things you have done against our country.”

“He was lying to you, Dima, and he lied to all the children who were training with you.” My voice broke as I begged Dimitry to understand. “I never betrayed Russia. I had to do some things to survive- I can’t even tell you what it was because those are state secrets, but please believe me when I say I love the Motherland as much as you do and I never, ever would hurt anyone.”

Dimitry looked at me with blank eyes. I was shocked to see there were none of the warmth in those round eyes that I had remembered from my days at the orphanage. I stood to leave.

Before opening the gate, I turned around and addressed him again. “Dima, did you ever ask yourself why the man named Richard mysteriously found you and trained you to become a killer?”

“He said we knew you best so we would be able to track you down and kill you.”

I laughed miserably. “No, I know that man who hired you. He’s been trying to kill me for a long time, but he never succeeded. All the killers he sent after me ended up either dead or arrested. You know why? Because I have been trained by the finest fighters and was taught to detect and evade hostiles. But you know what? Richard also knows me well. He knows I never hurt those I love. No matter what they do, I never shoot at my friends. So, that’s where *you* came in, Dima. Think!”

“I don’t believe it.”

“It’s true. Ask yourself. Why were all the trainees who were being prepped to kill me from the same orphanage? Richard researched my past. He hired my old friends to come after me, because he knows even if you or the other children from the orphanage shot at me a million times, I would never hit back.”

“That man said you killed many Russians,” Dimitry said, with less conviction.

I dried my tears completely before speaking. “I had you in my sights at the park when you were spraying me with the machine gun. I had a clean shot but I didn’t take it. The other shooter- I injured his left arm, just to stop him from gunning me down. But I didn’t kill either one of you, did I?”

Without waiting for his reply, I rushed out of the cell and headed back to my residence.

I burst into Dustin’s computer lab and heaved myself on his desk. “I need your help, and I need it fast.”

“Woah, is someone dying?”

“Get inside CIA’s server and get me the prison transfer logs.”

The Russian hacker sighed. “Okay, as much as I like to pretend to know everything, hacking inside the CIA is not super easy.”

“Just do it. Find out where Dimitry was transferred.”

“Why?” Dustin pushed back his swivel chair.

“I’m going to break him out.”

I could hear Dustin’s sharp intake of breath. “Wait a minute, wasn’t he the man who tried to gun you down and turn you into minced meat?”

“He was made to believe horrible things about me,” I said. “Trust me. He is not the enemy.”

“I’d like to believe that but evidence shows otherwise.”

“Dustin, he’s my *friend*.”

“No, he’s a killer,” the hacker countered. “He tried to kill you in cold blood and right now, he is right where he belongs.”

“Dustin, you haven’t seen what they are doing to him,” I exclaimed. “The CIA black ops are going to designate him as a terrorist and make him disappear. He’ll be tortured. The interrogators are going to put him through the most terrible enhanced interrogation techniques. I can’t just leave him there.”

The hacker studied my watery eyes and agreed to help me. For fifteen minutes, he typed in various codes into his computer program.

Then he turned the chair around. “I found your friend.”

“They’ve moved him already?”

“Dimitry is being held at a supermax holding facility in Wausau. It’s a place near the Wisconsin River.”

“Good. Send me the prison blue prints.”

“Hey, it’s not so simple,” Dustin warned me. “According to prison records, your friend has been placed in the Enemy Combatant Wing.”

“So?”

“It’s the maximum-security unit, meaning breaking him out would be a lot harder than normal prisons. You can’t just wear a disguise and waltz in. Dimitry is not allowed to have any common time, or walks in the prison yard. Absolutely no human contact except when the guard slips in food on a paper tray.”

“Just- send me the prison schematics.”

“It’s already on your phone. In case you are searched for electronics, the guards may hold on to your phone-”

“I’ll memorize the schematics,” I assured the hacker. “You’ll be able to unlock the gates for me, correct?”

Dustin scratched his head. “That super-max prison complex is privately owned.”

“Why should I care?”

“Because unlike federal penitentiaries, this complex uses a proprietary software to maintain their perimeter security. These closed-source computer software are very difficult to hack into. I can’t guarantee if I can open all the doors remotely.”

“That’s okay, Dustin, just open the external electrified fence for me. I can manage the rest.” I stood up. “Oh, and print some credentials as well. An FBI badge for insurance, and a prison guard uniform. I’ll switch the identities during exfil.”

I had thought rescuing my childhood friend would be a fairly simple operation but, on every turn, I had faced obstacles.

When I arrived at the prison complex, the guards were in the middle of a routine shut-down, that meant all inmates, personnel and staff were forbidden from leaving their allotted stations.

The Enemy Combatant Unit was manned by thirteen armed guards. I managed to enter under the guise of a janitor and entered the common area adjacent to the guard’s surveillance room. The yellow utility cart I was heaving did not contain cleaning materials. It was equipped with climbing gears complete with heavy-duty glider parachutes, freshly pressed police and guard uniforms and a universal jamming device that served to reroute the prison call directly to the computer expert. If the guards raised an alarm or decided to dial 911, Dustin would be their emergency operator.

The door to Dimitry’s cell were not automated. I had to use a propane torch to melt the interior of the metal lock before being able to enter. My childhood friend was deep asleep.

“Dima!” I whispered.

He awoke with a start. “Please,” he was whimpering. “Not again. I can’t take the pain anymore.”

“Dima, it’s me!” I shook him gently, pulling him to his feet.

My Russian friend looked bewildered. “What are you doing here?”

“I am getting you out of here,” I assured him. “You’re going home.”

Dimitry’s face hardened. “I will go nowhere with you. You are a traitor.”

“I’m your friend, Dima. Why don’t you see that?”

“You work for the Americans!” He was speaking louder.

I was so frightened that he might alert the guards that I begged him to listen.

“I only want to help you, and I’ll take you out of here whether you like it or not.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere with you,” Dimitry reiterated.

“Suit yourself,” I said, making up my mind. “It’s not your choice. I love you, Dima, and I will never let you get tortured to death in here.”

“Why would you care?”

“Last month, two FSB operatives died in CIA custody. The interrogators said their hearts failed after the voltages of electricity that were being administered to their genitals were too fatal. I am not prepared to see you die.”

Dimitry narrowed his eyes. “You really didn’t betray Russia?”

I tossed a pressed uniform at him. “Change. You will be pretending to be a guard as we walk out.”

My relief knew no bounds when Dimitry finally cooperated. He believed me and accompanied me to the extraction point. Six hours after I rescued him from the secret prison, my friend was on a secure flight to Moscow, under an alias Dustin had created for him.

I was still in New York, and could feel the lively energy in the city. The nights were illuminated by brightly lit skyscrapers and commercial buildings, and the roads were teeming with busy people. The constant noise of construction, the sirens of ambulances and police cars, and the honking of city buses, and the yellow cabs made this city appear full of life.

I strolled past the dollar stores, and looked through the window of the coffee shops with donuts, the diners with gourmet cuisines and the libraries adorned with books and records. Night was strangely peaceful in this city, because soft music poured out from the bars and the caf  s, and beyond the shores of the Hudson River, I could see the serene silhouette of the infamous statue of liberty.

Despite all of this peace in New York City, I was not able to stay for long.

The Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cole Morgan, recognized me when I was strolling in front of the FBI Building in New York, and he asked me to step inside with him for a word.

I asked the deputy director what had happened, and he told me that the Bureau had come across actionable intelligence which proved that an Italian-American navy commander was planning to stage a coup in the United States.

"How do you know this?" I asked him curiously.

Cole Morgan showed me several maps. "The FBI was able to trace several hundred shootings this month. Random acts of terror taking place in schools, malls, hotels, and theaters. But we have evidence that the Italian guy was behind all of it. He supplied a group of White Supremacist with guns and automatic rifles, and then made them carry out shootings."

"You are talking about that Admiral named Bastico?" I asked.

"Yes," the Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation replied. "Bastico and his German colleague were behind these attacks in many locations of the United States. His plan was to create chaos in America and overthrow the Biden Administration. But he has a secondary plan now."

"What is his plan, sir?" I asked.

"As the deputy director, I oversee all FBI domestic and international investigations and intelligence," Morgan said. "We arrested a number of NSA and CIA operatives who work for him in the black ops program. Those men admitted that they were sent to Afghanistan to create a fake terrorist group which will dress as Taliban fighters. The Italian man ordered his mercenaries to attack NATO troops in Kabul to force them to withdraw from the country."

"Why does Bastico want NATO troops to leave Afghanistan in a hurry?"

The Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation explained how the Italian man halted all shooting attacks inside the United States for one month in order to focus on using the Taliban to take over entire Afghanistan. "Their real plan is to make the Taliban take over Pakistan and steal all of Islamabad's nuclear arsenal and use it to detonate an atomic bomb over India and Russia first."

I gasped in shock. "Why does he want to use a nuclear device over Russia?"

"His plan is to frame Afghanistan when he nukes Moscow so that Russia can retaliate and destroy Afghanistan completely. He really hates Afghans, and Moslems in particular, so his next plan is to drop a nuclear bomb over the United States, so that the American military can take revenge and give a nuke on Afghanistan."

I was saddened to hear the sinister plan of the Italian man. But I was not very surprised. The Italian-American army officer was a close friend of Richard's and the two men thought and acted in a similar way.

I remembered that when I first arrived in the United States, and began a romantic relationship with Cynthia, Richard was infuriated with me, and told me never to see his step-daughter again. But Cynthia and I loved each other, so we continued to love each other. This caused Richard to get very angry and he wanted to take revenge on me by bombing and destroying my country. He wanted to nuke Russia.

That year, Richard used his mercenaries to hack the entire NORAD and computer defense system of America and showed them false reports, that looked as though Russians were attacking America with nuclear weapons. This caused America's defense system to automatically release almost fifty nuclear bombs towards Russia. I knew what destruction that could cause and I knew if those bombs landed in Russia, every single person in the country would be evaporated. I became desperate to stop the launch, so Dustin and I raced to the Colorado State Defense Department. Richard tried to place the area on a lock down to prevent Dustin from accessing the panel, but we managed to make our way inside the launch office, but Richard found out that I was trying to save Russia, and deactivate the launch codes, so he hired several gunmen to stop me. He hired two crazy shooters to fire at all the employees at the defense department, so that they could not try to deactivate the bombs that were about to take off towards my homeland.

When Richard still could not stop me from entering the launch base, he released knockout gas to incapacitate us, but Dustin and I wore protective gas masks and continued to work on the deactivation of the nuclear launch. Richard then contacted me directly and pretended to be concerned. He told me that the only way to stop the launch was to let the weapons launch freely, because trying to stop it would cause it to blow. I knew there would be no outside help, so I contacted the Secretary of Defense and told him to contact his Russian counterpart, and confirm whether the Russians actually launched a missile at the United States. However, when the Defense Secretary contacted the Russian Interior Minister, he denied sending nuclear weapons towards America. However, the American military was confused, because Richard continued calling them and announcing that the Russians were almost close to nuking the country. At this point, I knew there would be no one to help me, and no power could stop the fifty nuclear warheads from heading into the Russian Federation. The death toll chart inside the Pentagon showed an approximation of eighty-nine million Russians would die in minutes if the American bombs landed. I was petrified, and screamed in anger. I cried to God and prayed for the safety of Russia. Just when I had

lost all hope, and became overcome by despair, Dustin shouted, and told me he found a way to corrupt the defense system's computer codes, and this caused the nuclear launch orders to abort.

I was weeping in relief and joy.

We were able to prevent a nuclear bomb from going off.

My attention was diverted to the FBI chief who was talking.

Cole Morgan was speaking again. "The man we are looking for has ties with the Italian mafia and for now, it seems he is angry about his own terrible war crimes in Afghanistan, and hates all Moslems. He wants Taliban to look like criminals and to sit in War Crimes Tribunal, like he was in."

"Why couldn't the FBI arrest him?" I inquired.

"One of the reasons we were not able to arrest the Italian naval officer is that he had an affair with the president's daughter, and had connection in important places." Morgan replied. "He also has some high-ranking intelligence officer working for him."

"Really?"

"Yes. We found out that one of his close friends is a CIA analyst who gives him all the idea for framing Russians for cybercrimes." Cole Morgan said. "Since 2005, he has been meeting Chinese PLA communist leaders, and telling them that Russian SVR agents are paying Moslem Chinese to bomb Beijing and Tiananmen Square."

"You are saying that the Italian man was actually bombing the Chinese government buildings?"

"Yes, and he framed many Russian high-ranking officials for it." Morgan said. "He wanted Chinese forces to attack Russia through Mongolia. It was a long plan, but fortunately, some of Bastico's agents defected and told us about his plans."

"His obsession of framing Russians and Moslems is very unusual," I commented.

"He also framed Chinese Moslems and blew up several Chinese nuclear powerplant during 2006, and told the PLA, that Uighur Moslems are doing it. This caused the Chinese government to begin persecuting millions of their Turcic Muslim population."

The FBI Deputy Directed left soon after and I returned to my New York apartment.

This time I had evidence. I had enough information to tie Richard to the assassination attempt on myself.

Dimitry confirmed that Richard had recruited him and trained him to become a killer. He then sent him after me. If I could prove this in court, Richard could be tried as a domestic terrorist. I was tired of seeing him hurt my loved ones and use them against me. Brainwashing my childhood friend was an unforgivable act. Richard betrayed my trust irreparably.

I immediately mailed a copy of my evidence against Richard to Langley's investigative department so they could request a judge for a warrant and search Richard's property. I couldn't believe I was this close at finally bringing him to justice, but I was also apprehensive. Now that I was this close, I couldn't let him escape. I personally headed to one of Richard's safehouses and hoped to be part of the extraction team that would bring him in. When I arrived at the safehouse, it was surrounded by armed personnel. They identified themselves as NSA police officers and told me they were granted clearance to shoot to kill.

I was surprised to see the National Security Agency was so eager to capture Richard, dead or alive. I inquired why they were not arresting him. The squad leader told me they received a bomb threat and that Richard had threatened to detonate a giant bomb if the team moved in.

I knew this was the way Richard always worked. He always kept a failsafe, a backup plan in case of an unexpected event. I donned one of the bullet-resistant suits and made my way into Richard's building. I used the rear entrance and found Richard lounging in his kitchen patio.

"John, dear boy, I was wondering when you would show up." Richard said, with mock warmth.

"I am here to bring you in," I stated.

"When I defected from East Germany's Stasi and joined the NSA, I was impressed by the breadth of this organization. It was however too broad. Then I started this black op program, not just to protect the Western parts of Europe, but also to keep organized criminal groups in a leash."

"*You* are the criminal here."

"I wouldn't deny that the men who serve in my black op division are akin to mercenaries, but they have done a lot of good for the world, wouldn't you agree? Look at you for instance. I made you. I saved your pathetic life and gave you the chance to start all over."

"You went rogue, Richard, and made your employees believe they were serving the American people when all they have been doing was your slavery. This black op team is a criminal organization and the US government will shut it down today." I raised my gun and jerked my head. "Move."

Richard didn't budge. "The NSA consider me an enemy of US, and they don't care if I die."

“Neither do I!” I shouted. “I am personally handing you over to the feds. Let’s go!”

Richard twisted his pale lips. “They will gun me down the minute I walk out that door.”

“Suits me. I won’t feel sorry for you.”

“I won’t survive once I take a step out that door.” He raised one of his snowy eyebrows.

“I don’t care.” My impatience was rising.

“But you should.” Richard looked at me eagerly. His eyes were wild with excitement. “Your native motherland will go under nuclear meltdown if I do not remain alive and unharmed.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I planted a bomb at a high value location, somewhere where it can cause severe damage to both humans and the environment.”

“Where did you plant the bomb? Tell me.” I loaded my gun and aimed it at his head. “The location. Now!”

“You let me walk away, and maybe I’ll tell you.”

“Not going to happen. I’ll shoot you if you don’t tell me where in Russia you planted the bomb!”

“As we chat now, my associate is making sure the bomb is fitted properly.”

“Where is he? Tell me or I will shoot.”

Richard laughed. “No, you won’t. You can’t kill me because the bomb I designed is connected to a tiny machine in my heart. It monitors my pulse. The seconds my heart ceases to beat, the bomb will detonate and create a catastrophe in Russia. It’ll make the Chernobyl disaster look like a picnic.”

“Fine, I won’t kill you but I will keep you locked in here till eternity.”

“That will be a problem. You see, there is a code I have to relay to my associate in Russia. Only I know the right combination. If I don’t call him every twenty minutes and give the newest code, he will know I have been compromised and he will activate the bomb.”

Richard sighed. “So, you see, you don’t really have much of a choice except escort me to a safe location, away from the cops.”

“You better tell me the codes.”

“Silly boy,” Richard scoffed. “You cannot expect me to give away my life insurance to you.”

“Dustin, are you hearing this?” I spoke into my headphone.

“Yes, and I’m trying to locate the bomb Richard says he planted in Moscow. I am not getting any signal.”

“Why not?” I took a deep breath to steady my heart rate. “Dustin, we have less than twenty minutes.”

The hacker sounded troubled. “The bomb is not activated, so it’s not emitting any signal right now.”

“Listen, I need you to reach out to your contact in 32335.” I told my friend, referring to GRU’s most elite cyberunit. “Tell them to cut down all communication lines over Moscow.”

“I’m on it,” Dustin announced. “But it would be helpful if I knew which location to focus on. Moscow is huge.”

“Look for any nuclear powerplant. Richard mentioned something about Chernobyl so I’m assuming he’s found one near Moscow and is planning to detonate it.”

“Wait, I think I got something. You are right. My friend at the GU just got back. There is a nuclear reactor under Kremlin, called the Ilyich Power Station.”

“What? Why would the Russian government do something so stupid and risky?”

“It’s a state secret, but a former FSB operative told me it was meant to be a kind of backup generator for the government in case power was out.”

“Good work, Dustin. Now I need you to contact the FSB and tell them to send their bomb disposal experts to the nuclear reactor.”

“It won’t help at all,” Cynthia’s stepfather was grinning provokingly. “The nuclear reactor is a massive underground building. The FSB could spend days in there without locating my trigger switch. What do you expect them to do? Excavate the Borovitsky Hill.”

I ignored Richard’s sneer and addressed Dustin again. “Tell FSB that the bomb threat is imminent. You might want to mention Borovitsky Hill. Kremlin is literally perched on it. But don’t mention Richard’s involvement.”

“They’ll have questions,” the hacker warned me.

“I know, but deflect them until I can get a cover story ready. Dustin, FSB can *never* learn the truth about this. They must not find out that the director of an American black ops group was about to blow up Kremlin. It would lead to war.”

“I got you,” Dustin assured me and disconnected his comms.

Richard sighed exasperatedly. “You are pushing my patience to its limits, John. I suggest you take my advice and escort me safely out of here. This is your only chance to save your homeland.”

“I’m not taking you anywhere,” I maintained resolutely. “You pulled the last string, Richard. You went after those I loved and you destroyed their lives.”

"If you are referring to the meth-addicts I rescued from the Siberian orphanage, I have to say I am surprised you think those vagrants love you."

"They were my friends," I said. My voice cracked. "Dimitry was my best friend."

"Yet, he was eager to be part of the hit team that took you out." Richard commented smugly.

"You manipulated them into hating me."

"No! I merely told them the truth about you- that you are a weak pathetic boy who runs around from one master to another. And as for the Russian street urchins I recruited, I was doing them a favor. I gave them a new life in exchange for carrying out a few kill jobs for me. You of all people should know I am a reasonable man."

"Reasonable!" I couldn't believe Richard actually meant those words. "You took the lives of thousands of Americans! There was nothing reasonable about it."

Richard crossed his legs. "You may be many things, John, but one thing you are not is wise. You fail to understand that sacrificing thousands of lives today allows us to save millions tomorrow and give our government the resources to save more by exporting democracy to nations who are drowning in the abyss of bigotry. I personally supported the 9/11 theatrics because I knew the attack would give the US government pretext to invade Afghanistan- where a much overdue pipeline was in the agenda- as well as Iraq, where my own private military contractors had ample opportunity to improve the infrastructure of the oil-rich nation."

"This is a most depraved ideology I've ever heard."

"It was all sanctioned." Richard drawled. His lisping Austrian accent was more pronounced. "This country was becoming weak. We needed an attack like September 11, 2001, for people to be reminded that they are at war; that they should be united against a common enemy. And it worked. Before you call me a monster, you should at least acknowledge that I did some good in this world. After pledging my allegiance to the United States, I genuinely devised plans to better this country."

I motioned for Richard to get to his feet. "Enough! I don't want to hear another word from you. Let's head to the entrance so the NSA police can take you into custody."

Richard remained frozen in his place. "Like I told the NSA boys, if they attempt to kill or capture me, the bomb detonates. So, unless you want the Russian capital to go up in a very toxic flame, you will obey my instructions. Oh, and before you think of double crossing me, let me assure you that the bomb my trusted associate had fitted beneath the Borovitsky Hill is not a radio-controlled device. If the bomb detonates, I rigged it to make it will appear as though someone from the White House sent the signal. You know what that means, right? Moscow, or whatever remains of it, will think Washington committed an act of hostility against their country and they will promptly retaliate."

"What do you want?" I said tightly.

"Now, that is what I called a good negotiation." Richard steepled his fingers. "I want one of the military's viper attack helicopters on my front lawn in thirty minutes. And for insurance, I will need you to fly me out of this crowded abode."

I felt so angry that I thought my head would burst. For so many months, I had prepared a case against Richard, and when I finally hoped to bring him in, he activated his contingency plan. I was being coerced by him yet again, forced to help him escape justice.

Once more, he held a gun to my head, except this time, it wasn't my life or Cynthia's life that was on the line. I knew Richard wasn't bluffing when he claimed to have placed a bomb beneath Kremlin. The Russian government would indeed disappear into a mushroom cloud if I didn't escort him safely out of the reach of NSA and DOJ officials. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do, but I had to listen to instructions to the letter. I relayed Richard's demands to the NSA assault team leader, and after listening to what Richard was capable of carrying out, he agreed to send a transport helicopter for us.

When the pilot retreated from the chopper, I took his seat and prepared to fly Richard out of the vicinity. He instructed me to drop him off near Los Angeles International. I knew once he entered the airport, I would lose him forever, but I swallowed my frustration and allowed him to disembark near the runway. Before Richard stepped off the helicopter, he turned to me and with all his strength, swung his fist at my face. I was still grasping the controls and couldn't duck fast enough.

He struck me more viciously again and shouted fiercely. "You thought you could outsmart me? Well, you are nothing but a weak little boy who thinks he can make a difference."

Instinctively, I fought back, locking him into a chokehold, but Richard gasped audibly and reminded me that if he died, the nuclear bomb under Kremlin would explode, and if I remotely hurt him or caused any injury, he would not contact his associate to call off the attack. I abruptly released him. As soon as Richard regained his breath, he began hitting me again. It seemed as though the old man was venting his rage on me now that I would be unable to fight back. As Richard's fist plummeted my face as I tried to use both hands to deflect his blows, before finally kicking Richard out of range and rolling out of the helicopter.

I narrowly escaped and Richard disappeared inside one of the airport hangars.

My delicate investigation into Richard's latest activities yielded favorable results. I identified the men who were present in the meeting. One was the American ambassador to Pakistan while the other two men owned a Europe based arms manufacturing company. The fourth man was wearing a U.S. Navy uniform. I recognized the insignia. He was the commander of a destroyer. The Navy commander barely spoke, only nodded to Richard's suggestions. Cynthia's father was coaxing him into moving his warship nearer to the Indian ocean so that he could stage an attack on the ship and frame the local Pakistani citizen for the terror. America would naturally retaliate and the two weapons manufacturers would be ready at a minute's notice to supply arms to Pakistan so they could use them to wage a holy war against the United States. Richard told them it was the perfect time for a large-scale war because people were still wounded by the American invasion of Afghanistan. The CEOs agreed to produce three times their usual supply and ship the weapons to rural residents around the Pakistan-Afghan border.

Meanwhile, I was being unable to find a motive for Richard's plan. Why was this man so eager to start another war with the United States? The Iraq and Afghanistan war had cost the American government billions of dollars and a war with Pakistan, which was a nuclear power, would have crippled the U.S. military completely. I knew I had to prevent him from going forth with his plan, but why Pakistan? Did the country mean anything to him? I decided to conduct investigations on my own.

I went to Richard's office when Cynthia wasn't home and searched every single hiding place. I went through all his files. Then in an invisible folder on his computer, I saw hundreds of photos. Nearly all the pictures were of the Russian woman and her family; the mother and her young children whom I had hidden so well from Richard's attack team, but my protection had been inadequate. A photographer must have been stalking the family twenty-four hours a day. There were pictures of a young girl in her school uniform, in the park, inside shopping malls, with her friends and most disturbingly in her very own house. I suspected that Richard had someone set hidden cameras inside the property but that was impossible because I had hired a security detail to check the interior of the residence very thoroughly. No electronic device was found. I set out to solve the enigma and studied the perimeter of the Russian woman's home. I accounted for every person who lived in her house: her husband, six children and occasional guests who were mostly her relative. It was the first time in years that I had personally monitored the Russian woman's life. She had become older now and wore large shawls over her body. It must have been due to the influence of her Indian husband that she changed her wardrobe completely but there was the unconscious motherly love emanating from her. I became more determined to protect her daughter from all harm.

The Russian woman's youngest child was graduating from grade school. It was strange to see a child you had witnessed being born to have become an adolescence. She was sixteen, dressed in her mother's fashion but she walked with the springy step of a child. From her childish demeanor, one would think the sixteen-year-old was a mere six-year-old. Long printed shawls covered her body and hair. She wore embellished traditional dress and pressed trousers. It was an Indian-Pakistani outfit, I noticed with shock.

Maybe I had been mistaken all along.

The Russian woman's husband was not from India. I searched his birthplace and my internet search result gave an ominous location: East Pakistan. The wife and daughter of the East Pakistani man had adopted the traditional attires and thus were draped in layers of embroidered clothes. Now it made sense why Cynthia's father had decided to start an all-out assault on Pakistan. Judging from the high level of security I had assigned to protect the Russian woman's family; Richard must have deduced that the family was related to me in some way. He specifically targeted the daughter hoping to hit me at my weak point. I refused to allow him to play with my life. I could never let him or his men take the girl away from the family. The notion alone was so terrifying that thinking that Richard would be able to carry out his sinister plans made my heart beat so fiercely that I thought I would faint.

Having gained first-hand experience in the terrors of brain washing and sexual exploitation, I knew what the old man was capable of doing. He not only mutilated my body but injected me with female hormones in order to alter my sexuality. The man had no limit to his depravity. Him trying to kidnap my sister was the last straw for me. Until then, I had tolerated his jealousy, his sick games, his manipulations and even his little obsession with Cynthia, but attacking the girl or the mother, a woman who I had considered a mother figure and whose children I had come to see as my very own siblings, was something I could not tolerate. I knew he had links to Eastern European human traffickers. There was no doubt what he would do to the young girl if he succeeded in abducting her. Richard was capable of damaging her so severely that she would become lost forever; her mind would be empty and soul would be pained eternally. Cynthia's stepfather believed I was the culprit who stole his Cynthia from him. He wanted to take revenge on me by stealing what was the closest I had to a sister: the Russian woman's youngest child.

Cynthia's father was wealthy and had contacts in almost every law enforcement agency in the world but I knew he earned his millions via unofficial or illegal channels. I traced his bank transactions and exposed records of him wiring huge sums of dollars to offshore accounts in Asia and the Balkans. Many of the people who received money from him were convicted criminals. I tracked his itinerary and discovered that he had met with eleven South American entrepreneurs in the past year; nine of whom were later imprisoned for arms and drug smuggling.

I compiled hundreds of separate files and filled them with what the police would call circumstantial evidence. I mailed copies of it to the Department of Justice, hoping it was enough to implicate him and reward him a life term in prison.

My efforts were once again inadequate. The DOJ's deputy attorney general contacted me personally a week later and told me I needed actual proof- hard evidence that would demonstrate Richard's guilt. I was at a loss of what to do.

Fifteen weeks later, an unannounced visitor arrived at my safehouse near the Umpqua National Forest in Oregon. I recognized the man but could not recall his name. His face was familiar because I had seen him during the first few years after arriving in the United States. He was Richard's partner at the NSA and often was present at the briefings. After I welcomed him into my underground safehouse, he identified himself as Rear Admiral Kent Hogan. It was a surprise. The man I knew back in the eighties was not such a high-ranking military officer. He had been the chief of the Counterespionage Group for the Central Intelligence Agency and consulted with Richard on nearly every aspect of national security. The two men had seemed inseparable.

I was astonished to see how the man located me in the middle of nowhere, but it should not have come as such a shock. The Rear Admiral had been in the intelligence gathering business for decades and locating me was probably easier for him after I tried to make waves by mailing evidence to implicate Richard to the Justice Department.

Judging from his smoky-grey hair, the man was at least a decade older than Richard. "I didn't realize you were still with the Agency, sir," I told him.

"I'm not." Rear Admiral Hogan asserted, widening his blood-specked eyes. "The POTUS put me in charge of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, where I get to monitor force protection, security, law enforcement, and emergency management functions for all Department of Defense occupied facilities in the National Capital Region. Great job if you enjoy being chained to your desk twenty hours each day. Coming to Oregon seemed like a nice idea."

"Why did you come to see me?"

The man spread out one of his gnarled hands. "I think you know the answer, son."

"The DOJ forwarded my evidence box to you," I speculated.

The elderly man nodded. "I found the entire stash piled on my desk one morning and then I recognized your name. You and Richard went way back so imagine my surprise when I saw that it was you who was trying to implicate him in over two hundred separate crimes."

I opened my mouth to explain my position, but the Rear Admiral silenced me with a wave of his hand.

"When Richard recruited you to work as his double agent, I knew you would be very resourceful. And that is exactly why I made this long trip to see you." His cerulean-green eyes glowed with vigor. "Richard has evaded capture and investigations so many times that the State Department believes he is untouchable. They are considering offering him a deal; amnesty in exchange for the names of all his criminal partners."

"What partners?"

"You don't know?" Rear Admiral Hogan flattened his waxen lips. "Hadn't you served under him in League 13?"

"Yes, it was Richard's black op division which he operated under NSA's jurisdiction, or at least that is what he wanted me to believe. I got out when I found out the truth. It was front for a criminal network."

"Correct." The old man affirmed. "Dozens of CIA officers and NSA operatives worked in League 13, and not one of them ever figured out that Richard was a fraud. His clearance level made him feel as though he had carte blanche to carry out unauthorized ops. You were the first person to discover his true intent, and tried to halt his underworld operations. You were the only person who was capable enough to remain one step ahead of him. I believe your past experience in the Soviet and East German Camp, both as a recruit and later, as a double agent, made you sensitive to fine details."

As soon as the Rear Admiral mentioned the Soviet camp in which I was forced to train and become a spy, my eyes burned with nostalgic tears.

The thought of the Camp brought back memories I had hoped to leave behind in the Eastern Bloc. Those years of my life had been akin to living in a super max prison except I was a free prisoner. I had the privilege to walk around the countryside and travel to exotic

places but I was bound within the chains of slavery. There was a death axe lingering constantly above my head. Before graduating, the Colonel had surgically implanted a small capsule at the base of my skull. I was told it was a standard practice for all field agents to have the chip placed near your cortex. Once it was activated, I was told that the Camp could track my location and send help if I ever needed it. It was their way of ensuring my safety. It was many months later, when I tried to escape and attempted to jam the signal of my tracker, Dustin had warned me not to do anything foolish. At night, I prayed to my Lord to save me from this terrible predicament.

King of the Spirit

My Lord of Bounty and Blissful Grace,
Shall remove from this realm and surely efface-
Souls who used His bounties and strode-
To deeds forbidden by His Word.

They worshiped over dying waves,
Calling upon saviors who could not save,
Abandoning creeds practiced long ago,
But now buried beneath mountains of snow.

I am forced to bear a wistful heart,
Anointed with stains of misery,
Condemned to serve through stressful years,
A benefactor - guilty of perjury!
Oh, my dear heart, we shall forget the pain,
Forget the tears upon my cheek,
Forget the betrayals and its stain,
And resolve - never again to be weak!

Saith the Benevolent Lord, "I created the spirit
And humankind only that they might
worship me." How gracious is my Sustainer-
Who rescued me from my plight!

Thus, in dire anguish, I cried unto Thee,
To replace my hardship into ease!
This I seek, oh, Redeemer of the weak,
To live and die in lasting peace!

I seek reprieve from the torment-
Which Thou had decreed,
I beg of Thy grace and repent;
So, hasten to my need!

My Lord of Glory and Gracious Might,
Blessed be Thy name, The Originator of Light.
In moonlit nights will I worship Thee,
Accept my gratitude and permit me
To glorify Thy praises till eternity.

My dear friend then enlightened me as to what the capsule really contained. In addition to being a tracker, it was fitted with a fatal dose of toxic nanoparticles that could be released into the blood stream at the Colonel's discretion. If he suspected an agent had gone AWOL, he would activate it, instantly killing the subject. This was his insurance policy. I remember weeping bitterly when Dustin first told me of that. The Colonel often ordered me to kill people he considered to be enemy of Communism and I abhorred taking the lives of

those victims. I wanted to run away from the Camp, and get as far away as possible, but it was no longer an option. I couldn't believe I was trapped in this life forever.

I was sent to the United States when I was still a teenager. My mission was to pose as an American college student and remain in the country as a Soviet sleeper agent.

It was a lonely job; I was under constant threat of cancellation. The group that I worked for had spies everywhere. Of course, the chief of the training Camp had ingrained in the recruits that we were legitimate emissaries of the USSR, but that was far from truth.

The Camp in which I trained was not a branch of the Soviet government. I, along with thousands of recruits, had been misled to believe we served the legitimate government. We were sent on clandestine missions all over the world and had to eliminate criminal masterminds, war lords and often politicians who the Camp believed would affect their nation adversely. Oftentimes, our job required us to assassinate certain individuals. We would be given a detailed profile of the target. It was obvious that the people the Camp wanted us to eliminate were criminals who had carried out thousands of extrajudicial killings or had attempted to spur their nations into war. By removing those belligerent head of states or diplomats, my organization thought they were keeping the world safe. It was our mission to prevent the world from slipping into the abyss of destruction by starting another world war. I remember the Colonel once telling us that in the past decade alone, he and his colleagues had prevented over five major wars, several genocides in Eastern Europe and Africa and ensured the leaders of the communist states in the Eastern Bloc were all cooperating fully with his organization.

As a fresh recruit, I was sent to East Berlin to train under the most diligent Stasi officers, many of whom were decorated soldiers from the second world war. Some openly announced their loyalty to the past Nazi regime but their skills were unparalleled. I learned sharp shooting and hand combat from those men. Several months into our training, many foreign dignitaries would visit us and offer advice as about world politics and teach us how to become good leaders. At that time, I was a mere teenager and mistakenly assumed the stoic-faced men who paid us intermittent visits were diplomats. They had been in fact leaders of the other Camps. During the course of my training, I learned that the former KGB Colonel who had rescued me from prison wasn't the only person controlling the Camp.

It was a transnational organization based in East Germany and had training Camps in two dozen nations. Nineteen directors jointly controlled the Camp and decided what missions would be a priority. They voted on which world leader should win and who should die.

Gradually I learned who the leaders of the Camp were. Among the men who sat at the head table was the director of Spain's National Countersubversive Organization, the former director of Danish Defense Intelligence Service, the Deputy Director General of Argentine Intelligence, the former head of Poland's Committee for Public Security, or the *Kds.BP* which was responsible for surveillance of Polish citizens as well as intelligence and counter-espionage operations, and the remaining officials were either KGB or Stasi senior chiefs who managed the logistics of the Camp- a group they referred to in their meeting as the *Militärische Allianz*.

While the CIA considered it to be an international terrorist organization, and an organized crime syndicate that sought to cause mayhem, the *Militärische Allianz* believed they were maintaining world peace by controlling national governments and regulating the sale of weapons and intelligence.

The *Militärische Allianz* was involved in the trading of weapons, military secrets, industrial intelligence and medical technology among European countries. East Germany's Ministry for State Security was not officially a part of the transnational *Allianz* but the *Staatssicherheitsdienst* knew and approved of the Camp's existence. As a fresh recruit, I remember how I had to spent a month under the supervision of two Stasi district commanders in Dresden. It was there that I became aware of the existence of other recruiting centers. One *Staatssicherheitsdienst* official informed us that they had nineteen field offices scattered across eleven countries. The communist country's secret police had authority only inside East Germany, but the Camp and its leaders wielded influence over a global network of spies, entrepreneurs, physicists and politicians. The Stasi had a dossier on a.

Senior politicians in the Socialist Unity Party, the ruling party of East Germany, openly supported the former KGB colonel's training Camps and his recruits were often deployed to give them round the clock protection. Since the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* controlled the government and the electoral process and supervised the omnipresent Stasi, keeping the leaders of the Party safe was one of the chief functions of the Camp. I myself had to serve in the protective detail of the chairman of the State Council. It was during these missions that I came to know what the Camp's real purpose was. The Colonel and his partners in the *Allianz* were seeking world domination, and although they believed they would keep the international community safe, with every passing mission, I was less convinced of the sublimity of this cause. I think a turning point in my conviction came one evening when two men were brought to our Dresden field office.

We were told they were former Camp recruits who had been passing information to the American and were loyal to the CIA. I knew one of them. The short young man who laughed easily and offered a helping hand to the new recruits. He had been in the Soviet camp when I was first rescued by the Colonel and he had taught me how to defend against a knife attack. Now, he and his partner stood

before us, blindfolded and shaking in terror. The local Stasi commander arranged for a firing squad and had them executed but not before I was able to get a closer look at the young man from the Soviet camp. I wanted to speak to him, apologize or at least thank him for helping me when I was an unsuspecting naïve recruit.

When I got near him, I saw the cloth that was wrapped around his eyes were soaked in tears. The man had been weeping profusely. The Stasi officer gave a brief speech explaining how these men were traitors and deserved to be killed but all I saw was a scared young man who had hoped to get out of this confined life and find a better future in America. The pleasant young man was not a dangerous or violent enemy. He did not deserve to be shot like an animal and cremated without any courtesy.

I made up my mind that I would not stay in the terrible Camp forever. I had to get out of there somehow. But in order to do that, I had to graduate. Only the finest recruits were granted the status of field agent. Those who excelled in sword fighting, sharpshooting, hand combat and close combat warfare were allowed to leave the Camp. I began to train harder than ever before, hoping to gain the trust of my commanders and graduate. In less than two years, I was promoted and sent first to Paris, London, and finally the United States of America.

Soon after landing in the U.S., I began to look for ways to escape the clutches of the colonel and his Camp forever. It was in this juncture of my life that I came across Richard, or more accurately, he found me. Introducing himself as the director of League 13, a black op unit of the NSA, Richard offered me a way out. In exchange for being a double agent and help him bring down all nineteen branches of the Camp, he would secure my pardon and grant me a new identity. I would be free. I agreed to help him after he and his NSA partner Kent Hogan, showed me hundreds of case files that proved that the Colonel and his associates cold-bloodedly assassinated dozens of world leaders and executed hundreds of his own men whom he had suspected of being spies.

I knew those information were accurate. I myself had witnessed how the Colonel and his Stasi partners expeditiously killed anyone they remotely suspected of being a spy or a criminal. I wanted the bloodshed to end and so I agreed to help the Americans.

For the next three years, I lived a triple life. That Camp knew I was in America at their behest, as a sleeper agent in the heart of America's major cities, whereas I had turned on them.

Each year, the chairman of the East Germany's National Defense Council in concert with specific Kremlin leaders and the chief secretaries of the Central Committee would approve allotted annual funds to the *Militärische Allianz* and personally meet with the Colonel and his partners to remain apprised of their mission. *Allianz* leadership would keep Kremlin in the dark as to their true objective but outwardly present their organization as a legitimate intelligence agency. However, it was in these meetings that the normally reclusive commanders of the *Militärische Allianz* would personally show up.

For many years, the CIA and NSA in collaboration with the British intelligence had attempted to identify the men who controlled the transnational *Allianz*, but met with little success. They wanted to dismantle the Camp once and for all but could not do so without identifying who were running it. If the leaders were allowed to remain free, then they would simply open a new Camp and train recruits to create another army. It was paramount I identified the colonel's partners.

Under the directives of the Richard and Kent, I managed to gain the trust of the Colonel and find myself a position as his bodyguard. This allowed me access to the clandestine partners meetings that was taking place inside a Cold War era bunker in Schwerin. I stealthily snapped photographs of each men and recorded their conversation so that Richard's black op team in NSA would be able to positively identify them and find the location of their individual field offices. It was six months after the Schwerin meeting that I received the news. The Camp was to be disbanded. The American and British intelligence, in concert with the KGB's liaison officers conducted a mass raid that successfully neutralized all nineteen field offices of the *Militärische Allianz*. In the raid, six *Allianz* commanders were arrested but the Colonel, along with the rest of his associates, managed to evade capture and despite a global manhunt, they could not be found.

Once the Camp was dismantled, I was free. Or at least I thought I was. Richard and Kent kept their word and handed me a folder which contained a passport with an American name, a new ID and some cash. Surgeons at the Walter Reed Military Hospital successfully removed the tracker embedded capsule from the base of my skull and I was granted the permission to travel freely.

But my liberty did not last too long. The NSA soon contacted me again. Richard personally requested my help. He claimed that there were several former Camp commanders still on the run and some were planning revenge attacks on the American government for bringing down their terrorist organization. Richard asked me to remain under his employment in League 13, and help him capture the Colonel and the rest of the fugitives. I hoped the task would end soon, so I agreed to offer my advice in locating the men.

Months turned into years, and my missions never stopped. Richard would have me retrieve unique objects, rare artifacts, recipes of chemical bombs, copies of the hard drive from unidentified men and even asked me to torture and kill some of his enemies. After several years, I realized what was happening. It was the Camp all over again. I was getting embroiled in another web of deceit. Many things Richard asked me to do did not sound legitimate.

I realized this when he accompanied me to Tallinn. It was a reconnaissance mission, he had assured me. We were supposed to watch and follow a man named Jüri Rüütel.

Richard told me he was the former director general of Estonian Internal Security Service, but he was one of the people who had served the *Militärische Allianz* and knew the location of the Colonel and other partners. We cornered Rüütel in a farmhouse outside Tallinn and Richard held him hostage at gunpoint and asked him to give up the location of his friends.

Rüütel refused to betray his friends. Richard was, however, relentless and he became increasingly agitated. He asked me to wait outside as he questioned the man. I was reluctant to obey but decided not to argue. I waited outside the barn when I heard an earsplitting shriek coming from within. The scream sounded like a mortally wounded animal.

I ran inside. Richard was speaking Deutsche, shouting questions at the Estonian intelligence chief and ordered Rüütel to tell him the location of the gold. I tried to understand what he was referring to. Richard continued to put forth the same question. Jüri Rüütel finally relented and described a landmark that was located in Ääsmäe, a settlement in northern Estonia. He told Richard the gold was hidden inside the tombstone of a specific grave in a cemetery in Harju County. Richard hurried to retrieve his map and marked the location. While he was momentarily away, I seized the opportunity to free the man. When I approached him, I couldn't breathe. The metallic smell of fresh blood burned my nostril. Something splashed on my boots. I glanced down and saw that I had stepped on a pool of blood. The former director general of Estonian Internal Security Service was bleeding profusely from both his hands. I searched for the wound but my eyes refused to believe what I was witnessing. The man didn't have any fingers remaining on his hands. It had been cut off one by one. The fingers were lying in a haphazard pile on the grimy floor. I tore my eyes from the gruesome sight and attempted to free whatever was left of Rüütel's hands. Only the little finger of his left hand was left. Richard didn't have the time to cut it off before I returned to the barn.

Richard saw what I was doing and told me not to release the man. I was burning with rage and ignored his commands. I cut off the leather binds from Rüütel's arms and legs and used my hat to stop the blood flow. I tried to raise the Estonian man to his feet but he was too weak to stand. When Richard noticed this, he whipped out his service gun and shot the poor man. The bullet ripped through Rüütel's eyes and exited in the back of his head.

I remember shouting at Richard, demanding an explanation as to why he tortured and killed an unarmed man, but Richard scoffed and told me he was saving my life. He claimed that Jüri Rüütel was a dangerous terrorist who admitted to killing hundreds of women and children and that was why he couldn't be allowed to walk free.

At this point, I knew arguing would be futile. Upon my return to the United States, I met with one other person who knew Richard better than I did. I conversed with Kent Hogan. He had known Richard for years and jointly created League 13, a black op division of the NSA that conducted clandestine operations throughout the globe. When Richard had defected from the Stasi in the late seventies, Hogan was the chief of the Counterespionage Group for the CIA and guided his friend to the top tiers of the intelligence department.

I informed Kent Hogan of what had transpired in Estonia and he admitted that since dismantling the *Militärische Allianz*, Richard had been erratic as he constantly tried to increase his influence in the world of espionage. He had effectively gone rogue from the NSA and no longer took orders from the DOD or the White House. Hogan feared Richard had lost balance and was returning to the ways of his former Stasi days.

I was motivated to help Richard bring down the Colonel's camp and the *Militärische Allianz* network due to the belief that once this was over, I would never have to carry out illegal activities and assassinate politicians or civilians. I swore to avoid bloodshed no matter how much my enemies tortured me or tried to kill me. I was determined to lead a different life, a better life.

Once I saw how Richard treated his prisoners, I knew that serving him was not an option. The world of espionage was not suiting me. I made this clear to him. Richard then begged me to carry out one last mission for him but I refused. His black op unit had captured an agent who worked for the Federal Counterintelligence Service, which was better known as the FSK. Russia's FSK was formed months after the KGB was dissolved, but its function remained the same. Richard and his NSA team rigorously interrogated the Russian spy, until the man's heart failed due to torture and he died. My heart grieved to hear the news. It was the second time a prisoner had died under Richard's supervision. I wanted to lodge formal complaints with the chief of NSA, but they refused to even acknowledge the existence of League 13. Thirteen days later, I heard that two American intelligence officers had been captured in Perm and the FSK were holding them in an undisclosed location. Two days after that, a CIA informant inside the *Federalnaya Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki* notified us that the two American spies were brutally tortured to death, presumably in retaliation to the death of the FSK operative. It was an endless cycle of pain and heartache.

Since then, I distanced myself from the world of espionage and tried to lead a normal life. I found love and moved away from Richard. His stepdaughter Cynthia agreed to live with me and this made me acutely pleased, but my happiness was short lived because

soon, I began to face the wrath of my former benefactor. Richard was infuriated with me for taking his stepdaughter away from him. He demanded I break up with Cynthia and make her detest me, but naturally, I didn't agree.

I faced dark consequences for my choices. I thought I was strong enough to brave any obstacle he put in my way, but I was wrong. Richard made my life a living hell. He began to expediate his criminal activities and expanded his black op unit into a larger organization. Richard began to carry out numerous bombings and shootings both inside the United States and in Europe. He framed many of his crimes on me so meticulously that I did not even have a clue that I was being set up. He used Cynthia as a pawn and had her plant evidence in my jacket pocket or leave incriminating files in my closet, so that when police or the FBI raided my place, they would think I was the culprit.

His constant attack on my person angered me but I refused to take justice in my own hands. In the course of twenty years, Richard had tortured and killed many powerful people and I knew who his enemies were. He personally executed high ranking Stasi officers and Soviet intelligence officers whose loved ones and friends were hungry for revenge. I could have easily handed him over to those enemies and allowed them to exact justice, but it would not have been legal. I knew if any one those former Soviet agents got their hands on Richard, they would have tortured him to death. And I would have been complicit in the act. It was something I promised myself I would never do. If Richard was indeed guilty of so many crimes, I would simply gather evidence and forward it to the relevant authorities so that he could face justice in the legal court of law.

Despite many efforts, Richard managed to evade capture and punishment by signing plea deals with the Justice Department. Many times, he testified in court against me, claiming that I had committed those crimes. He even accused his former colleague at the CIA of being a double agent and framed the man for several murders. Richard also framed one of his employees at the NSA of torturing a Russian diplomat to death. I knew these were untrue. Richard was deflecting blame by accusing his innocent colleagues of crimes he had committed. In the end, he would squirm out of federal prisons by offering the government information about impending terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. I later discovered that those future terrorist attack that Richard managed to prevent were the ones he had planned to carry out in the first place.

In recent years, I understood Richard's motives more and more. His longtime friend, Kent Hogan, told me how Richard had been a member of the ultra-secret transnational *Militärische Allianz* but was expelled from the clandestine group after his partners caught him siphoning off money to private bank accounts in South America and Canada. The KGB and the Stasi secret police began to target his extracurricular activities and threatened him with arrests.

Fearing for his life, Richard turned to the United States for help. He sold off his friends in the Stasi and in exchange, received immunity from prosecution and was offered a job at the CIA. He later joined the National Security Agency and began to target the *Militärische Allianz* members one by one. His greatest adversary had been the former KGB colonel, the man who saved me from the Soviet prison and trained me to become a spy.

When the *Militärische Allianz* was taken apart, the Colonel lost power over his East German camps and subsequently the Soviet government began to lose control over Communist Germany. Less than a year after the Camp was dissolved, the Berlin wall came down and the two Germanys were united. While it was an exhilarating news for many, Richard had planned for this outcome since he began his crusade against the Colonel and his former Stasi colleagues. With the *Militärische Allianz* gone, Richard was able to rise to the top of numerous crime syndicates and blackmailed them into paying him significant shares or carry out free lance work for him.

The Camp had been the only hindrance to his criminal activities because they worked hard to keep dangerous criminals and terrorists off the street. It was therefore not surprising that ever since the former KGB colonel was brought down, Richard was able to spur dozens of nations in to going to war with one another. From the fall of the Berlin Wall, nearly a dozen of conflicts broke out in different warzones and many lives were lost.

Once Richard reached the upper echelons of the NSA, he created a black op unit to carry out illegal activities and side mission that were not sanctioned by the U.S. government. He profited from illegal domestic surveillances, assassination jobs, kidnappings, illegal weapons sale and used that money to fund an entire network, using a private army to carry out assassinations for him. The mercenaries in his employment included former military men, mafia clans, and free lance hitmen from all over Europe. He used his unlimited funding to expand his network into a global crime syndicate that had bases in all of the continents. His black budget program enabled him to build safehouses in almost every country in Europe and Africa.

He used his mercenary soldiers to carry out political assassinations and kidnappings to extort money, all the while putting up the ideal façade of being an American intelligence chief. In his weekly meeting with the Senate Intelligence Committee, Richard would give them glowing reports on how wonderfully his black operation unit carried out clandestine missions on behalf of the CIA. If they suspected him of carrying out a high profile assassination and directed Internal Affairs to investigate his actions, he would simply frame one of the CIA directors or the FBI's communications liaison agent for the crime. It was ironic how each time a senior CIA officer

suspected Richard for a crime, or accused him of funding a terrorist organization, a week later, he would either be found dead with a suicide note proclaiming self-guilt, or he would be framed for the very crime Richard had been accused of.

Sometimes, I feel guilty about my part in Richard's criminal activities. I had unwittingly handed the keys to the underground crime world to him when I helped him bring the Colonel down. When all the *Militärische Allianz* members were taken out of the equation, Richard had free reign in the world of the mafias. It was true that the *Allianz* often authorized extrajudicial killings but they were firm of their resolution of not allowing war to take place.

For several decades, the former KGB and Stasi officers kept a sharp rein on underground crime rings and prevented wars from breaking out in Europe and Americas, and they never created fake terrorist organizations or framed other for their activities, but once the group was dismantled, and the communist government crumbled, Richard wasted no time in funding several wars and creating fake terrorist organizations to blame his criminal activities on. He arranged it in such a way that the terrorist would cheerfully take responsibility for his dirty work. All the random acts of violence would be attributed to specific groups whose members would upload videos online, declaring allegiance to certain religion or country, while demeaning and degrading others.

When Rear Admiral Kent Hogan showed up at my doorstep, I knew it was not a social visit. He was not an ordinary man. Our paths crossed years ago when Richard recruited me to work for the NSA.

Kent Hogan headed the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, and was formerly the Director of Pentagon Force Protection Agency. In a few clipped sentences, he made the reason of his visit clear. The nation was facing an impending threat, and Hogan suspected his old friend Richard was behind it.

"I've worked with him since 1980," Rear Admiral Hogan told me. "And I feel that I know him well enough to understand that he is planning something big, something bad, for both the United States and its allies."

"Why do you need me?" I said.

Richard's former NSA colleague sighed. "Let's just say our interests align, okay. We both want him gone."

"Admiral, if you want him gone, why not just arrest him?"

"Because it is not so simple," Hogan replied. "He has information."

"Information?"

"Uncle Sam doesn't want him alone. We want to neutralize the remaining of his terrorist cells. You have heard of his private security contractors?" The Rear Admiral scowled furiously before speaking again.

I nodded. "Blacksand."

"Blacksand is only one of the many groups Richard is controlling now," the Rear Admiral acknowledged. "The DOD confirmed that Richard either created ISIS personally or paid someone to do it. Either way, he has a huge share in the ISIS project, but the bad news is we haven't identified any of the other cells he is operating and we have no clue which countries half of them are based in."

"I have to admit, I had no idea you were alive. Richard told me about your boating accident. There were no survivors."

"That's how I managed to stay alive." Kent Hogan laughed bitterly. "After he killed two of our mutual friends, I realized I would be next."

"Who were they?"

"This funny dude, Alfred, he was the director of national intelligence. Was Richard's first boss, in fact. The day after Alfred called me saying he believed Richard was behind the truck bombing in New Jersey, I went to see him in his Camden residence. He was dead when I got there. Coroner ruled it as an accident. Apparently, he was speeding way too much on his treadmill, and suffered heart attack. No foul play, but I suspected it was one of Richard's Blackwater boys who manufactured the heart attack. And then my other friend who was the director of DOD's National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. He reopened an investigation into Richard after NGA's employees collected and disseminated maps and charts that showed Richard moving armies of men across the Canadian border. He died a week later in a car crash. I was never a believer in coincidence so I began to disappear from public view."

"And faked your own death?" I speculated.

"Yeah, I decided to be dead before he could kill me. That's why I am still alive."

"You are with the Pentagon now," I stated. "Your resources must be extensive. Have you at least identified the countries Richard is operating from?"

"The Pentagon believes he established bases in more than thirty countries. We know he has around fifty trusted associates who control those cells, but we don't know who they are."

"Do we know any of those fifty odd men?"

“So far, the State Department identified sixteen of them. As his former colleague, I know him well, so the Pentagon wanted me to lead the search for Richard. I’ve assigned a team to follow Richard around, and am working to track the rest of his men. I am constantly liaising between the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense. Both want to end this. They are done being blackmailed by Richard and his goons.”

“He’s just one man,” I reassured him. “The DOD will be able to track him down- without my help.”

Rear Admiral Hogan grunted pointedly.

Before being placed in charge of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, Hogan was the chief of the Counterespionage Group for the CIA. It was during his tenure that Richard began to create his own black op unit which he used to carry out missions that were not sanctioned by the U.S. government.

When he addressed me, his voice was amicable. “Richard holds a conviction that the American people are very susceptible to manipulation. He proved his point numerous times when he framed CIA officers for crimes he himself carried out, or had hired mercenaries from his private firms do for him, and would pin those on his coworkers or superiors, all the while getting promotion and praises.”

“I had gathered as much, sir.”

“Ever since joining the Agency back in the seventies, Richard had been persuading his superiors to give him the authority to neutralize the transnational *Militärische Allianz* networks in East Germany- the Camp as you called it. He knew you long before you accidentally joined us as a double agent. Richard had tried to recruit a number of Camp operatives before you but they were all caught and killed. You were the only one who not only survived, but achieved the impossible and brought the Camp down along with dozens of satellite offices worldwide.”

“Sir, are you saying Richard was after the Colonel?”

“No, the former KGB colonel was not that important.” Rear Admiral Hogan noted. “He was one of the nineteen leaders who controlled this organization known as the *Militärische Allianz*. Or *Allianz* for short. They had secret cells in over twenty countries, but were headquartered in East Germany, which is something you were aware of, as you reported that your training took place mostly in the East Berlin and Dresden centers. Officially, the Camp was a terrorist network, but unofficially the CIA knew that your Soviet colonel and his colleagues were actually trying to control and limit crimes in Europe. They existed to prevent war from breaking out. Yes, the group often carried out assassinations we did not like, but admittedly, the world was more peaceful when they existed. As it happens, the US government never liked the idea of one man or one organization having too much power so they agreed to let Richard bring down the camp. He recruited you and convinced you to help him. And after you dismantled the organization, Richard wasted no time in hijacking the CIA and taking over the command. He used Stasi files that had every small detail saved about high ranking former *Allianz* members and blackmailed them into giving him the location of their money. He used those money and power to create multiple organizations and carried out many bombings.”

I observed quietly. “He convinced me the *Militärische Allianz* was a dangerous organization that had to be stopped?”

“Well, he certainly wanted the Camp gone,” Kent Hogan agreed, “but only because it presented an obstacle for him. If the Camp was functioning, Richard would never have been able to carry out so many terrorist attacks in Asia, Europe and Africa.”

“What is the mission objective now, sir?”

The Rear Admiral grimaced. “Arresting Richard is not the priority anymore. The State Department is more interested in shutting down his global terrorist network. We think he is seriously considering carrying out a large-scale attack on the United States government.”

“I hear your concerns, Admiral and I see where you are coming from, but as much as I dislike Richard, I doubt he will actually attack the United States directly.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I had been to China myself. I saw how his Blacksand operatives of his security company were spreading their influence over Chinese national and private military sectors. They were building a super army. All Richard wanted from the Chinese was for them to invade Russia. He is still obsessed with destroying the Russian Federation. I personally toured the internment camps he had ordered Blacksand operatives to build in the Xinjian region of China. It had the capacity to hold tens of millions of people. He had been urging the Communist Party to declare war on Russia.”

“How are you so sure of this?”

I nodded. “Because I met with the Chairman of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. He told me that Beijing gave clear orders. They had to cooperate with Blacksand operatives who were working directly under Richard, and were giving military advices on how to proceed. The internment camps were being built so that when Chinese forces actually invaded the Siberian regions and occupied the

Amur Oblast, they were supposed to ship in millions of Russian citizens to these camps as slave laborers. Blacksand operative gave clear instructions to the Chinese chairman to practice organ harvesting on the Russian prisoners and until the invasion, gave them the liberty to begin experimenting the functionals of the camps on the local Uyghur population.”

“Invasion of Russia is not an easy matter,” the Rear Admiral began. “How?”

“It is Richard’s long-term plan. I spoke to the Chinese Deputy Minister of National Defense for Administrative Affairs. He had defected a year before but knew of Richard’s plans. The deputy minister told me that China has numerous sleeper agents inside the State Duma and the Russian Armed Forces, and scores of army officers are in their payroll. Blacksand would give operational support when China invades Russia and any Russian citizen who resists the occupation will be brought to the internment camps that have been constructed in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

“What, the guy wants a remake of Nazi Germany, by attacking Russia and enslaving six million soldiers all over again?” Kent Hogan spoke derisively.

“It is possible Richard wants to restore Nazi glory, but it is more likely he is doing this to hurt me.”

“Hurt you!” The head of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center shot a withering look at me. “Explain.”

“Sir, I don’t want to sound petty, but it began after I dated his daughter, who is actually his stepdaughter. Richard warned me to stay away from her but I loved her so I refused. Ever since, he has been relentless in trying to get back at me, targeting my Russian friends, framing them for crimes, and now, using his League 13 mercenaries to break into Russian weapons storage facilities and stealing nuclear tipped missiles just so he could frame Russia for a host of crimes. Now he wants to use China to destroy Russia permanently. It was all part of Richard’s plan. He has an active office in Shanghai and is interested in using China to occupy and destroy Russia, using his private security contractors.”

“Who *are* these Blacksand operatives?” The Rear Admiral inquired. “Mercenaries? Americans?”

“Most were former military, but no, I was able to break into several Blacksand installations and what I saw astounded me. Most of the mercenaries were *not* Americans. They were mostly veterans of the Australian Defense Force. Several of the senior operatives in Blacksand who were in charge of advising the Chinese army were in fact formerly part of the 4th Commando Regiment of Australia’s special forces. Highly motivated, skilled men. It’s not a wonder that they were so adept in gaining the respect of the Chinese forces.”

“Yes, it is a foreboding thought. This brings me to my original point. Since Richard is known to delegate his tasks to highly qualified mercenaries, taking him out of the equation alone would not suffice to halt the terrorist attacks that have been ongoing. Each one of Blacksand operatives are capable of igniting a war themselves. They have funds to last them for decades.” The Rear Admiral sighed. “Even if we arrest Richard, he has left enough people to continue this violence for the next three decades. Those private firms, which often disguise themselves as legitimate companies or law firms have unlimited funding and connection. They have at their disposal thousands of hackers and computer programmers who are capable of accessing NORAD. There are former intelligence officers who enjoy privileged positions within Blacksand. Those talented agents have learned how to frame innocent people for their own crimes. They learned from the finest manipulator, so sometimes I think we are just wasting our time fighting to save people.”

“It is true the more we fight to stop these wars, the more excited they become and start getting more aggressive in cooking up new plots to ignite conflicts.” I commented. “It seems that we can never win. This is not Richard we are up against now. It is an organization, a group so powerful that they cannot be fought, at least not in the traditional way. The more we fight them, the stronger they become.”

Kent Hogan flexed his gnarled fingers. “Alongside presenting Russia as a barbaric nation and Russians as prone to violence, Richard and his team tirelessly tried to show the world that Middle East was a terrorist entity. All my sources say he is personally controlling all this.”

“I seriously doubt he will touch the North American continent now.” I predicted. “Richard is active in *China*.”

“But the Pentagon has evidence he was behind the creation of ISIS terrorist network in Iraq, Yemen and Syria.” Kent Hogan maintained.

“His private security group was responsible for those carnage.” I stressed. “They operate like a transnational contagion, cooking up exotic stories, shooting bloodthirsty videos and uploading them online and declaring themselves to be an independent terrorist organization. Richard’s employees do these things using his money obviously, but not necessarily with his blessings.”

The head of National Counterintelligence and Security Center curled his lips. “Which is why we need to stop him from carrying out his attack on mainland United States.”

“What evidence do you have that an attack on U.S. soil is imminent?” I inquired.

“Well, here is the thing. In the past year, FBI’s counterterrorism division prevented three potential nuclear attacks inside New York city and one in Langley.”

“What? The Feds just happen to stop the attacks in time? Odd.”

“They had some help- I mean anonymous tips. Someone left messages on the FBI switchboard and gave them coordinates. By the time Bureau agents got there, the area was, well, dead.”

“Dead?” I repeated. “Meaning?”

“Think about what I just told you about Richard trying to pin a lot of his crimes of several Middle Eastern leaders and their family members. In the four attempted bomb attacks last year, the FBI found dead bodies of dozens of men around the activated weapon. The first two scenarios appeared as though two rival gangs suffered a fatal shootout that left them all dead. Some of the deceased were known members of the royal family of Brunei, Kuwait, UAE and KSA. Naturally, the FBI believed those men had smuggled the bombs in the U.S. via diplomatic pouches but before they could detonate it, all of them ended up dead. But the Pentagon took over their case and determined that it was likely a frame job. Ballistic reports showed some third party planted the bomb there and executed those men to make it appear as though Middle Eastern hotheads were trying to destroy our country.”

“So, who was the real perpetrator? Who brought the nuclear warhead in the first place?”

The National Counterintelligence and Security Center chief fixed a cold stare on my face. “Before I tell you that, I think you will be interested to know where those warheads originated from?”

“Where?”

“They were stolen from the *Baltimor* military airfield near the city of Voronezh. Russian authorities admitted grudgingly that SVR had been trying to locate the missing weapons for several weeks, but they hesitated to notify the international community for the fear of sanctions.”

“Oh, no.” I couldn’t suppress the groan. “If the bombs went off, then the DOD would have thought the Russian government ordered it?”

The former director of Pentagon Force Protection Agency clicked his tongue sympathetically. “Or the dead Middle Eastern men who were babysitting the warhead,” Hogan suggested. “Anti-Russian racism in America manifests in the form of far-right extremism and this allows Blacksand to carry on these false flag operations without hindrance, because they will deflect blame and simply resort to frame a Russian national for the bombing. My point is, there had been three nukes, about to explode and we could do nothing about it. Without those tips, we wouldn’t have been able to locate the radioactive bombs.”

“Whoever was playing these games by leaving anonymous tips on the FBI switchboard must have been behind the attempted attack,” I suggested.

“Good hypothesis,” Kent Hogan agreed. “Our chief tech analyst at the Pentagon, Hsu Chun-hsiung, was able to back trace the call and found out who the caller was. He uses aliases but his birth name was Joaquín Héraud.”

“French?”

“French father and Spanish mother. He was dishonorably discharged from the French Foreign Legion for carrying out unauthorized bombing over civilian populations. After leaving service, Héraud became a mercenary. Killer for hire whose current employer was Blacksand Security. The Pentagon believes Joaquín Héraud man is a digger.”

“Digger?” I gestured my bewilderment.

“Quite literally, he digs for a living. His favorite pastime is to drill holes and detonate missiles or bombs underground. Joaquín Héraud had active offices in Colombia, Brazil and Turkey but we don’t know where his current base is.”

“Didn’t Pentagon keep a watcher on him?”

“We did, and that is how we know this much. Joaquín Héraud was last seen six days ago in Kobuk Park. It is a small resort in the Big Lake area north of Anchorage, Alaska. He reportedly carried out some sort of drilling; our watcher was too far to get a visual, but after Héraud left, an earthquake with a magnitude of around five struck the Big Lake area. The US National Tsunami Warning Center did not issue a warning but told residents to remain alert.”

“I don’t understand. What does Joaquín Héraud have to do with the earthquake?”

“Hsu Chun-hsiung had his team run a secondary reading on the seismic waves produced by this earthquake and they confirmed that it was initiated by force, meaning an underground nuke was set off in that area to trigger a quake.”

“They are sure?”

“DOD sent agents to inspect the Big Lake area and guess what they found in the Kobuk Park? A hole of nearly seventy-five meters was dug inside the park. It was two meters wide, and there was clear residue of a high-explosive canister which contained a bomb that had detonated in it. The earthquake was not natural.”

“How could Pentagon be so sure of this?” I repeated my question.

“Researchers are now capable of discerning between ground shaking caused by nuclear explosions and the waves produced by regular earthquakes. The State Department is worried that Joaquín Héraud may be planning to detonate more underground bombs, and

Anchorage was just him testing waters. And since Héraud works for Richard's terrorist firm, we need to shut his operation down. And we need to do it fast."

When I didn't speak, the Rear Admiral continued. "The Treasury Department is at a loss as to where trillions of dollars had disappeared to."

I cleared my throat and commented. "Richard's private mercenaries had managed to siphon off hundreds of millions of dollars via U.S. banks to pay for the weapons, hotels, personal credit card debt and other expenses. They have enough money to last for years, and wreak havoc at will. Even if they can't purchase dirty weapon in the black market, there are plenty of places they could steal it from and continue the terror long after Richard is gone."

"Yeah, and all of this happened because your colonel's *Militärische Allianz* was dismantled," the old man said cynically.

I was taken aback. "Are you saying it was a mistake to bring down the former KGB colonel and his Camp?"

"No," the Rear Admiral proclaimed, "it was necessary. They couldn't have been allowed to become too powerful, but destroying the *Allianz* also meant handing a ready platter on Richard's hand. He has been making Blacksand execute terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, London and Berlin and this augmented the mobilization capabilities of his private contractors and mercenaries. He used racist groups, domestic terrorist cells to cover up his tracks."

"How large is his network inside the States?"

"The Pentagon estimates he has over five hundred highly-trained men working under him. Richard had been hiring only die-hard zealots these days, and possibly delegate the big tasks to them. Joaquín Héraud is one of his prized associates who had been entrusted with the dirty bombs and he was able to detonate these underground nukes, triggering earthquake in our country. Data taken from seismometers set up throughout Alaska showed that the bomb that was used was a relatively pedestrian one. We are fortunate he chose Anchorage to test out his underground explosions, because if he detonated a large warhead near the U.S. East Coast, it could trigger a fatal tsunami over Washington D.C. and Baltimore. People will think it was a natural earthquake, and law enforcement authorities would be at a loss as to what to do."

"Blacksand contractors are adept at carrying out terrorist attacks and then blame it on members of organized or quasi-organized criminal groups." I opined.

"Blacksand is planning to use an electromagnetic pulse weapon to sabotage the nation's electricity grid. We believe they are planning to coordinate a massive coordinated attack of fifteen military bases in South Carolina, Utah, Colorado, Florida, Pennsylvania and Texas."

I shook my head. "If the target is an army base, why is he after the electricity grid?"

"Because Richard probably knows that U.S. military bases are connected to civilian electricity grids," Kent Hogan informed me. "The Agency as well as the Pentagon believes the attack is imminent. And from the recent actions of Joaquín Héraud, I feel that the former French soldier is planning a diversionary attack in the form of his favorite underground nuclear explosion somewhere along the northeastern seaboard. Richard is behind this and that is why we need you to help us nail that bastard."

"Sir, I understand your eagerness to catch Richard, but something tells me the attacks inside America may not be his doing. At least, he may not be instrumental in carrying out such a massive-scale attack. He prefers to work surgically. Nuclear explosions, corrupting electrical grid. These are too loud."

"What do you mean?"

"While the men planning these attacks may be employees of Blacksand, they have autonomy to do anything really. I know that Richard is based in Europe. The guy is from Austria and he lived most of his life in East Germany, working with the Stasi. His primary objective is destroying Russia. I don't believe he would give all that up to create some chaos in the United States."

"Then who do you think is masterminding the whole operation?"

"It could be his right-hand man." I answered slowly. "A former brigadier general of the U.S. army. Richard doesn't encourage him, but he doesn't mind giving him free rein either, as long as his men are occupying positions of power in the government."

"So, Richard has tentacles inside the U.S. Army?" Hogan said hoarsely.

"Unfortunately, there are at least several hundred military men in his payroll. When I worked for League 13, his NSA black op unit, I remembered he rarely activated those assets in the army and navy. At least two Navy commanders are loyal to him. He kept them in his pocket as backup."

Kent Hogan looked distressed. "That means we got more things to worry about now. If the generals are compromised, we could be looking at a military coup in addition to a nuclear strike. I don't think our country faced such predicaments in the past three centuries." He sighed. "Tell me more about the Brigadier General."

“For the past three decades, every single crime he committed, including the EMP bomb in California’s electrical grid, and other major international disasters, he blamed it on either Arabs or Russians. Officially, the car bomb in Madrid was carried out by Basque separatists. The subway explosions in London was done by Asian youths. The Paris truck bombing, a disgruntled former employee of a defunct NGO. The church bombing in Sri Lanka. The shootout in a religious center in Christchurch. All seemingly unrelated terrorist events, carried out by different factions, but funded by Blacksand Security contractors. These mercenaries even framed the attack at Breitscheid Square in Berlin on two German-Russian students and the knife attacks in Lyon and Paris on Russian immigrants.”

“Why does he frame Russians for most of the bombing attacks?” Kent Logan wanted to know.

“Richard had personal dislike for Russia and the Middle East.” I blurted out. “If Pentagon’s assessment is correct, then Blacksand mercenaries will eventually detonate nuclear weapons over the United States, and frame Iran, KSA, Turkey or Russia for it.”

“What makes you think Richard will frame Iran and attack America?”

The Rear Admiral frowned darkly. “The military intelligence reported suspicious activity in the Persian Gulf region. Richard had apparently taken control of a naval ship and will use his hackers to stage an attack. He intends to launch missiles to the mainland United States and make it look as though Iran had carried out the attack. That way, he will not be answerable for his actions and the Pentagon will think Iran is responsible and will subsequently retaliate.”

“How is that even possible?” I said. “NORAD protects American and Canadian airspace. Twenty-four hours. How can Richard possibly launch missiles at America?”

“He has Blacksand operative working undercover at numerous air bases in Washington and Utah. They will disable the patriot missiles when he decides to launch. All the while blaming the Middle Eastern oil-rich nations or Iran for it.”

I nodded in comprehension. “And since the FBI already intercepted several potential attacks that had convenient Middle Eastern corpses lying about, they will happily swallow the narrative and America will have no choice but to give retaliatory nuke over densely populated cities in Asia and Middle East.”

“What do you think is triggering these courses of action?” The Rear Admiral frowned. “Blacksand was officially a private military contractor. Why would they go rogue and start a war with us?”

“It could be because the president refused to grant one of their members amnesty, or more likely refused their suggestions to invade another oil-rich gulf nation. Blacksand thrives during wartime; their profit comes from arms sale and post war reconstruction contracts. Without fresh wars, they will become broke. And that is why all these twisted frame jobs come into play.”

“Well, your advice would be invaluable to the State Department. Help me bring him down.”

“No, sir. I am tired of this war and hate,” I nearly sobbed.

“We have to stop him before he invades and bombs the United States and frames our allies in the Middle East for it.”

“How will he frame effectively?” I inquired.

Kent Hogan spoke forcefully. “My guess is that Richard paid someone senior, like a high-ranking government official inside the Iranian government who will claim responsibility for the attacks. That is how he will convince the world that Iran is the culprit. You are our only hope, son, so help us locate Richard.”

“If the Pentagon can’t locate Richard, I don’t see how I can. Besides, my concern right now is preventing Richard carry out an attack and frame Russia for it. I strongly feel that is his main goal.”

“This is war, son, and we all got to do our part.”

“Yes, sir, I know but I have been fighting this war for too long. I am tired. I want peace now. My time is almost up.”

I wanted to tell the Rear Admiral that my days were numbered, that I was suffering from over seven different illness and that my immune system was failing. I had almost lost the strength to go on in life.

I awoke every morning, shaking with uncertain dread. Due to a failing immune system, I could hardly walk briskly for more than a few yards.

My head spins constantly and I break down from time to time because I feel so lost and defeated. I felt terribly alone and to assuage the loneliness, I became more involved in combating international crime syndicates. I just hope that I can live long enough to help people because I promised myself that in my lifetime, I won’t let any more civilian die in phony wars. But I don’t know how long I can go on like this.

February, 2008

A former NSA agent who went by the name Ryan was assisting me in collecting evidence against Richard. The young agent volunteered to testify against Cynthia’s father in several high-profile cases and had promised to search Agency records for any discrepancies

connected to Richard's back door dealings with criminal affiliates. I was a little reluctant to enlist Ryan's help but he proved to be a valuable asset. Although he had been an employee at the National Security Agency, I didn't believe he had any further loyalty towards his former boss. Ryan offered to use my studio as his base in sifting through thousands of pages of transcripts and phone conversations which could be used as possible evidence. We have been doing research for days but whatever evidence Ryan had collected was dismissed by the DOJ as circumstantial or flimsy evidence.

I was getting weary. It was a long project. Ryan mostly crashed in my apartment as we both worked late into the night. I fell asleep on my work computer on most nights. It was probably on the third night after Ryan moved in permanently that I woke up feeling groggy. I tried to shuffle towards the kitchen but my legs felt heavy. I stumbled and fell on the floor. I am normally very alert even when awoken from the deepest slumber but this fatigue felt artificial, as though I was drugged. Through my drooping eyelids, I noticed Ryan peering at me. He was speaking to me but I could only hear echoes. It was a frightening prospect to be so helpless. I couldn't move my arms and saw Ryan placing caches of weapon in my room. I realized with shock that he was trying to frame me for a crime.

Another week of research proved equally futile. I decided to pursue actual evidence and realized I needed to search Richard's personal safe box that was buried in his basement. However, the security in his residence was impenetrable. I reluctantly enlisted the help of his daughter once more. Cynthia wanted to know why I was looking into her father. I corrected her, insisting that Richard was an imposter who had tried to dominate her entire life, but Cynthia made me promise that I wouldn't put him in jail. I said we can decide that after we both have seen the documents Richard kept in his safe box. Cynthia agreed and used her keys to enter the guarded compound. It was dark and empty. We made our way to the basement of the house and found the single stairway that led to the storage facility. Cynthia remained on the ground level while I climbed down the creaking stairs and located the safe box. It was an enormous fireproof data safe with an electronic keypad. I needed Cynthia's help to unlock it. She might know the password. I raced back up and looked for Cynthia everywhere, and finally found her in the cobbled front yard of the house. She was doubled over a small electronic device. Her face was hidden from view.

I was worried about her well-being but when I touched her shoulder, she turned and struck me on my chest, sending me reeling and barely regaining my balance in time.

"What was that about?" I protested.

"This!" Cynthia shouted, waving her phone at my face.

I stared at the video that was playing. The muted film was showing me in my apartment. Someone was stashing machine guns in my place. As the video progressed, the man's face came into view. It was the NSA agent, Ryan, who had been an employee of Cynthia's stepfather. What was he doing with the weapons?

I told Cynthia what had happened that day in my apartment. "I was drugged, I am sure of that. Your father, Richard was behind this."

Cynthia huffed angrily. "Can you not blame *one* thing in your life on someone other than my father?"

"Ryan set me up," I pleaded with her. "He must have planned the whole thing; planted drug and weapons after drugging me. Your stepfather is trying to break us apart, don't you see? He had me kidnapped so he could have me brainwashed for two years, all because he wanted to me to forget about you. When that didn't work, he sent assassins after me. Just look at the video. Richard sent it to you. How do you think he came into possession of that? He orchestrated it."

"I don't believe you," Cynthia said, but her voice wavered slightly.

She was unsure of what to believe so I went on. "This wasn't the first time I noticed anomalies in my life. In a bar two days ago, I was sitting alone when another one of these folks showed up and tried to stab me but I punched him. Others had to break up the fight. Look." I raised my fist to show Cynthia the bruises from the previous day's brawl. "I am telling you the truth, Cynthia. Your stepfather is the one who is messed up. Ever since I got out of the two-year captivity, I have been seeing a lot of killers approach me, aggressively too. It is not a coincidence. He is paying them to come after me, so that I would be gone from you. He wants you to hate me, can't you realize that? He won't leave us alone until our relationship is ruined. We need to do something about it."

"Like what?" Cynthia snapped. "Imprison him?"

I ignored her menacing tone. "Let's find out the truth about him first. I swear, if he is innocent, if he really is not involved with any transnational crime syndicates, then we are going to forget everything that happened and move on with our lives. Okay?"

I knew Richard was capable of many things, but that he would go so low was incomprehensible to me. When he sent Ryan to drug me, the man administers near-fatal dose of a combination of drugs that could have permanently damaged my brain. If my head had been working properly that day, I would have violently gotten rid of that vile man, and thrown Ryan out before he could frame me but I was dangerously under the influence of chemicals and had no recollection of what had taken place.

I had my blood tested the next day, and the results showed that there were several strains of toxins present in my body, one of which was responsible for short term memory loss. It was that day I realized my life had become entirely hijacked. I was so angry at Ryan that I wanted to kill him for drugging me so severely, but then I realized that he too may have been blackmailed or threatened by Richard. I couldn't trust anyone. A random colleague like Ryan intentionally drugged me and I, with my years of skills and training, could not foresee it.

Since that day, I never went to any bar or nightclub. I almost never drank in public, and drank water only if it was from a sealed bottle. My life was constrained because I had enemies everywhere. I hated to live in a state of paranoia, but I didn't want to be susceptible to future attacks.

May, 2010

Cynthia's father got in touch with me via one of his contacts at the NSA, an Army general I trusted. General Barnes was the director of intelligence for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and had personally guided me through my mission in Serbia when I had accompanied a team of Navy SEAL into the region to neutralize threats against the United States. After the NATO bombing ended in 1999 causes the withdrawal of Yugoslav armed forces from Kosovo, remnants of enemy fighters were preparing for guerilla warfare and the White House had authorized stealth action to eliminate the danger. General Barnes said Richard requested a meeting, and was claiming something urgent had come up. I was still angry at him for hiring my childhood friends from the orphanage to kill me so I ignored his messages. Richard then sent word to me directly stating my help was vital in saving innocent lives. I told him to use one his agents from his secret black op division, but he insisted I needed to be there because Cynthia was missing. She had gone to Lisbon four days ago but had stopped answering her phone after boarding a cruise ship that was scheduled to tour the coasts of South America.

My heart skipped a beat when I heard about Cynthia. The thought that she might be in danger made my blood run cold. I was prepared to do anything to save her, and that included working the devil himself. I agreed to meet Richard and asked him how I could help in rescuing Cynthia. He said he had a friend in South America who could help me locate her but I had to leave without delay. I boarded a plane immediately. My destination: Caracas.

A four-star hotel in Cúa had a reservation in my name. A hospitable suite furnished with amenities as well as a cache of ammunitions. When I went to the hotel lobby for the breakfast buffet, there was already someone waiting for me.

"Good Morning, Señor! I am Nicolás Moncada."

I looked at the athletic young man. "You know me?"

"Señor Richard said you were expecting me."

"Yes, I was expecting someone."

Nicolás smiled freely. "I hope you liked the room I reserved for you,"

"It's splendid, thank you." I answered. "Nicolás, I need to check out the shady neighborhoods here."

The Venezuelan man looked quizzically at me.

I elaborated. "I don't know what Richard told you, but someone close to me has gone missing. I need to find her."

"You mean the kidnapping," Nicolás said excitedly. "Yes, I know all about it."

"Yes, someone I love has disappeared and I am here to look for her. The cruise ship she was on docked here, at the Cabello Port. She may still be in the country."

"But Señor Richard already knows where the Señorita is," Nicolás confided in me. He leaned forward. "The kidnappers had made a demand. They wanted us give them fifty kilos of pure cocaine."

"Drugs!" I inadvertently raised my voice, receiving reproving stares from hotel customers. "Why do they want us to get it for them?"

"Because tonight, a transport truck belonging to the Beltrán-Leyva cartel will be delivering exactly fifty kilos of heroin to a safehouse in Paracotos. We'll have to intercept the truck and seize the drug and leave it at the drop site. The kidnappers promised to release Cynthia once they received the item."

"Why do the kidnappers want drugs for?"

"Señor, everything people do is for money. White heroin is valuable in the market. Each kilogram sells for one-hundred-fifty grands minimum."

I told Nicolás to find me a local map so I could prepare my ambush. Five hours later, I went on a reconnaissance mission and set a perimeter block, including two secondary traps on the side roads. Nicolás promised to take care of the escort vehicles while I disabled

the armored car and retrieved the package. The driver of the van suffered mild concussion while the Fentanyl based incapacitating agent I had used effectively neutralized the remaining security personnel.

The drug was inside a portable safety deposit box. I left the package in the designated spot and waited for the kidnappers to contact me. Twenty minutes later, I received a call on my hotel phone line. An unidentified man had left a message with the hotel's concierge. It was an address. Nicolás identified it as a popular night club in the capital city.

The night club was an exclusive place. Wealthy locals flocked the bar and all the tables were stacked with rows of champagne flutes and glasses. The night club was the party house of Venezuela's super-rich. I stood by the bar and studied for familiar faces. The kidnappers had specifically mentioned that Cynthia would be at this club.

Then I saw her! Cynthia was making her way slowly across the dance floor, studying the faces of the partying people. I could a huge smile breaking out in my face. She looked like a goddess in her flattering low strappy gown.

For several hours that day, I was afraid I had lost her and now Cynthia was back to us, safe and sound. It was wonderful. I began to move towards her discreetly in order to surprise her.

When I was right behind Cynthia, I called her name. She whipped around and nearly collapsed in surprise.

"You are okay?" I held her at an arm's length studying her face for marks of injury. "The kidnappers- they didn't hurt you?"

Cynthia smiled happily and wrapped her arms around my neck. "No, I am fine. Really."

Relieved, I held Cynthia to me and kissed her passionately for a long time. "I was worried, and afraid that something might happen to you."

Cynthia shook her hair off her face. "How did you find me?"

"I had someone helping me." As we spoke, Cynthia suggested we do a joropo dance to the music. "I believe he was one of your father's associate. He helped me with the negotiation."

"Who is he?" Cynthia wanted to know.

"There." I pointed out the young Venezuelan man to her. "His name is Nicolás."

Nicolás noticed us and hurried over. "So, this is the beautiful lady we worked so hard to rescue?"

"Thank you, Nicolás, for saving me," Cynthia told him.

"The only way to thank someone in Venezuela is to agree to dance with them, eh, *señorita*?" Nicolás offered his hand. "May I complete the Joropo dance in our traditional way?"

Cynthia laughed heartily and broke free from my arm. She joined Nicolás in a Venezuelan style joropo. I watched from the sides as the pair danced skillfully all night long. When it was dawn, Cynthia finally broke free to answer her phone. A moment later, she walked up to me and apologized profusely.

"Daddy just called," Cynthia said. "He is worried sick so he wants to meet me."

"That's fine," I replied instantly. "Where is he? I'll drive you."

Cynthia's face fell. "He already sent a car here. He's waiting for me at the jetport west of downtown Caracas."

I opened my mouth to protest but Cynthia silenced me with a kiss. "Don't worry. I'll be fine. After my father leaves, I'll join you in your hotel room."

Slightly disappointed that Cynthia would be leaving so soon, I agreed to wait in my hotel room for her. Nicolás offered to drop me off at the hotel. The ten-kilometer drive via *Autopista Francisco de Miranda* was peaceful. The highway was deserted at this early hour. Once we neared the exit, two vehicles overtook us and slowed dramatically.

"Nicolás! Watch out!" I warned my friend.

Nicolás nodded and put his foot on the brake as hard as he could. Our car shuddered to a halt. I lowered the window and was about to stick my head out and identify the car's occupants when a sickening thud sounded beside me.

I turned my head. Nicolás was slumped against the steering wheel. A dark stain was spreading in the back of his head. I glanced up in time to notice the shooter who was standing beside the driver side window. He raised his gun again but I ducked and kicked the door open before rolling into the concrete road. Two men exited from the second vehicle and began to fire towards me. I dropped myself on my face and aimed at them from beneath my car. A yell told me I had shot one of them in the legs. Before I could reload, I heard a sound behind me, then something metallic came crashing down on my skull. I slipped into blackness.

When I came to my senses, I opened my eyes but couldn't see anything. Utter darkness was overwhelming me. I tried to stretch out my arms but it hit something hard. I was in a severely cramped space.

A familiar pungent odor burned my nostril. It was coming from my left. The smell of death! In the darkness, I felt the clammy skin and gold chain. It was Nicolás. I realized someone must have buried me along with the Venezuelan man. I had to get out before the tiny space ran out of oxygen. The box felt like a wooden coffin. I ran my hands around the edged and used my legs to kick the surface. The

force caused minuscule cracks and dirt began trickling in, making me gag. I became breathless from the exertion. It was hopeless. I felt for the seams and screw holes of the coffin but those were sealed with wood glue. Clawing my way up would take several hours and would likely be futile. If this was a traditional grave, then I was buried at least ten feet underground. I doubted the oxygen supply inside this small space was enough for me to last that long.

I've faced numerous tragedies in my life, and many times, I wished for a quick death to end the miseries that were befalling me, so the world could no longer offer me new woes to endure.

But when I found myself trapped inside a coffin, squeezed in beside the corpse of a dear friend and partner, that was the day I realized that death was not nearly as frightful as the sinister entrapment of a hollow grave.

The day I was buried alive with a dead companion, I felt the chains of death tugging me deeper into the void. In my mind, I was alive, but my body was left for dead in a dead man's world.

Fear shook me to my core and I cried hysterically like a child. As my breathing became more and more difficult inside the grave, I tried not to glance at the taut skin of my friend beside me. Nicolás had an oddly tranquil look on his face, as though death had been kind to him. The dead man did not look afraid anymore. I was the one who was frightened of the unknown fate that was awaiting me. I didn't know how long I would remain alive in the land of the dead. I didn't think there would be any escape from this terrible plight.

I ran my hands through my dead friend's studded jacket. There was a burner phone in his pocket. I slipped it out and dialed a number from memory. Cynthia answered at the first ring.

"John, where are you?" She sounded more angry than worried. "I waited at the hotel for hours. You never came."

"Cynthia, are you still at the hotel?"

"No, when you didn't show up at the hotel, I called my father. He said you were supposed to spend the night with a local dancer. At the *Vive la danza* dance festival in Caracas."

"But I was going to the hotel to find you," I said weakly. Speaking was becoming strenuous for me. The lack of oxygen was beginning to make me feel lightheaded. "Where are you now?"

"I'm with daddy right now," Cynthia said. "We're at his NSA office."

"Cynthia, listen to me. I am in trouble and I need your help."

"Why? Wasn't the dancer good enough for you?" Cynthia sounded wounded.

I sensed there was a misunderstanding so I remained calm. "Please, Cynthia, I was not spending the night with anyone. Nicolás and I were driving back to the hotel when we got ambushed. He was killed. Shot. I don't remember what happened after. I suffered from a concussion. Then woke up here. I think I am buried!"

"Someone buried you alive!" Cynthia almost screamed.

"With Nicolás." I tried to keep my sobbing inaudible. "His body is right beside me. They probably thought I was dead too and placed both of us in a coffin."

"You're buried alive," Cynthia exclaimed again. "I'm sure daddy will be able to help you. Stay on the line while I get him for you."

A minute later, Richard's deep voice came through the phone's speaker. "John, can you tell us your exact location?"

"I don't know where they took me. I'm buried somewhere in Venezuela."

"Well, the phone you've called from is an untraceable burner cell, which means we have no way of tracking you either."

I could hear Cynthia arguing with her father in the background. She wanted to fly to Venezuela and search for me.

Richard was fuming. "Out of question, Cynthia. It isn't safe for you to go to Caracas right now. Besides, you wouldn't know where he is buried."

Cynthia raised her voice. "Daddy, I am going there whether you give permission or not."

I heard a shrill noise in the background. It sounded like police siren.

"You see, Cynthia, it will not be possible for you to leave this building," Richard explained to his daughter. "This is an emergency alert. Meaning the entire NSA facility is now under lockdown due an external threat. Until the lockdown is removed, no one gets in or out. That includes you."

Richard addressed me on the phone and apprised me of the situation on his end. "I'm sure you can understand the dilemma facing us, John, he said. "My team in the NSA black ops are all inside this facility right now, so we won't be able to send help your way. Not until the lockdown is lifted, which might take thirty-six hours."

"I won't last that long. There isn't enough oxygen in here. Richard, I am stuck in a coffin with a dead body."

"I know, which is why we have to discuss some difficult issues."

I didn't understand what Richard was implying so I asked, "What issues?"

“In case you don’t make it out of the grave, I am willing to note down whatever noteworthy information you have memorized.” Richard lowered his voice and spoke almost in paternal way. “Before your oxygen runs out, John, I will need you tell me where you stored your back up hard drives.”

“Why?” I was perplexed by his demands.

“There could be valuable information in those that may save countless lives.”

When I didn’t reply right away, Richard continued to speak. “Also, try to remember the numbered passcodes of your various bank accounts. If you don’t make it back, well, let’s hope you do, but in case the worst happens, I will make sure to use the money to help people in need.”

My mind was reeling. Cynthia’s father seemed unconcerned about my dire situation. I was buried in a coffin, squeezed next to the corpse of a friend, trying to stay alive in a cramped space that was running out of oxygen but all he was asking me to do was stay on the line and tell him the location of all my wealth and the passcodes of my secret bank accounts. I couldn’t understand why he would do that. I needed someone to find and rescue me, but Richard’s NSA office building conveniently initiated a lockdown the minute I had asked for assistance. It was a bizarrely ominous.

I thought quickly and told Richard my phone was dying and that I couldn’t hear him. Then I ended the call and dialed another fifteen-digit number.

My dear friend Dustin answered the call after the sixth ring.

“This is the operator,” Dustin’s shrill voice echoed in my ears. “You have reached the wrong number.”

The Russian hacker probably didn’t recognize the burner cell number so I spoke urgently. “Dustin, it’s me. Don’t hang up!”

“But of course it’s you!” The hacker muttered happily. “The voice print is a match. Are you okay? You are talking in a strange way.”

“That’s probably hypoxemia.”

“Lack of oxygen?” The Russian computer programmer stuttered. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m stuck in Venezuela- somewhere- buried underground, I think, but no idea where. Do you think you can find out where I am?”

“I’m trying to,” Dustin stammered. “And I’m heading to the jetport to go to Venezuela right now.”

“But it will take you forever to fly over here. Isn’t the fastest flight from Moscow at least fourteen hours?”

“Right, I’m not in my Moscow lab. I’m actually in Senegal.”

“Dustin, you are in *Senegal*?” I was astonished. “How come?”

“I was tracking a Ukrainian code breaker. He designed some awesome software- but was wanted by Interpol so the guy never stays in the same place for too long. Interpol believes he is the world’s most notorious hacker, and I agree. Rumor was he lived in Dakar until last month.”

“Can you find out where I am?”

The hacker paused. “I am running a trace right now. No, no!”

“What is it, Dustin?”

“It’s a burner cell. You’re using a phone that is untraceable. You need to help me out!” Dustin was panting. “What is the last thing you remember?”

“We were in a gunfight. My Venezuelan contact, Nicolás, was driving on a freeway, heading southeast on Av. Nueva Granada towards Avenida Luisa Cáseres de Arismendi when two cars blocked us and- and they shot Nicolás.”

“Were you able to identify them?”

“They were masked.” I replied.

“Okay, that’s a start. I tapped into the street cameras. The men could be seen dragging you and the other young man’s body in a blue van. I am retracing its trajectory.” Dustin paused. “Do *you* have any contact in Venezuela that can help look for you until I arrive?”

“Not any known associate, no.”

“I’m getting on a plane right now.” Dustin assured me. “I should be in Caracas in five hours. You’ll have to hold on until I find you, okay? I just need you to make sure there is enough charge on the phone.”

“Okay. I’ll sit tight.” Inwardly, I squirmed in fear.

I didn’t think there was enough air for me to breathe. I thought of the pain of having life snuffed out of my body so soon. The maddening thoughts reverberated in my mind with unbearable force.

Dustin was speaking fast. “Every cell phone has a distinct radio frequency: I can locate it once I’m within range. In four hours, I should land in Caracas. Until then, can you do me a favor? Stay off your phone. To conserve battery. Once I land, I’ll call you and keep you online so I can narrow down your location.”

“Dustin, I only have a limited supply of oxygen in this coffin. Nicolás, well, his body is, uh, right beside me and it’s getting difficult to breathe.”

My heart throbbed at the thought of Nicolás. Life could end so swiftly for some! I aimed the soft screen light at the young man’s face. A portion of his forehead was shattered from the bullet wound that claimed his life. The youthful fellow had now become stiff, his skin purplish-grey.

I was so afraid of death. I cried so desperately for freedom, for life.

My heart was racing so furiously that I could barely breathe. The oxygen supply in the narrow coffin was depleting and the presence of the corpse beside me was driving me to brinks of insanity.

I thought I would lose my mind. I feared I would lose the ability to think or speak. Trapped deep beneath the earth, I realized what insanity was. It was the loss of purpose, the absence of a future.

Each time I looked to my right, I saw the face of my friend. I saw his eyes. Nicolás and I had spent the whole day together. We had laughed and joked and visited historic landmarks in Caracas. Nicolás was an emotional person. He was so full of life that I had difficulty believing that the man’s body was decaying beside me. To have his dead body buried with me in the cold dark grave ten feet underground was enough to turn any human insane with fear and hurt.

Inside the dark grave, I begged god to free me from the terrors of this darkness. I prayed for him to give me another chance. This time, I would not let him down. I would give my life for humanity more than ever before. And then I forgot what I was praying for. I don’t know why or how, but I involuntarily started whispering one of the many songs my mom sang to me when I used to cry and curse my dad every time he beat me. It was a Russian folk song-*Na Sopka Manchurii*.

I sobbed, trying to sing *On the Hills of Manchuria* but I forgot the most of the lines. I remembered the song mentioned how calm the grave was, but the darkness inside my coffin was not tainted with tranquility. I lost track of reality and then suddenly as if in a dream - I realized I had come to the end of my life.

And I was all alone in the world of the dead. Time froze, death confronted me, my vision blurred and at some point along the way, I lost consciousness.

I must have fainted from the lack of oxygen when the vibration of the cell phone jolted me awake. Dustin was calling.

“I was able to track the van to East Caracas General Cemetery.” My Russian friend reported. “It should have been obvious to me. The cemetery is located near a slum. Gang members who live there often bury their dead in there.”

“How long will it take you to get to my location, Dustin?”

“Fifteen to twenty minutes. I’m on my way from the Simón Bolívar airport as we speak.”

“My phone’s battery won’t last that long. Only one bar left.”

“Just hold on, I’m coming.” The line went silent.

I stared into dark screen until my eyes began to trick me. It was so dark that I didn’t know whether my eyes were open or shut. I had never been afraid of the dark before, but now I was feeling cold dread seeping into my bones. Would Dustin ever be able to find me?

If the general cemetery was as vast as he mentioned, how would he ever know which patch of dirt covered my body?

I must have fainted because when I opened my eyes, I was lying on my back over a freshly dug ground. The burner phone was still clutched inside my fist. I blinked to clear my vision. The bespectacled face above me looked relieved.

“Aha, you are awake!” Dustin removed the oxygen mask from my face. “This mask enabled you to breathe pure oxygen. You should feel better already.”

I smiled weakly, trying to nod. “Dustin, how did you find me? The phone’s battery was dead. So sorry.”

“I monitored by Landsat-13 satellite and switched it to ground thermal imaging when your phone died,” Dustin explained, helping me to my feet.

“I’m glad you were able to re-task a satellite overhead at such a short notice.”

“I almost feared I wouldn’t be able to,” the Russian hacker sounded breathless. “There were eleven fresh graves and I started to dig up one at a time, because I didn’t know which one was you. Then I remembered the thermal imaging. Ground temperature was being recorded during one of the satellite overpasses. I processed the results and found the existence of a thermal anomaly inside General Cemetery in Potosi, Venezuela. The cemetery lay in ruins but it wasn’t too difficult to find you after that. There was only *one* warm body in the entire cemetery.”

Dustin guided me to the rented car but I had regained enough strength to be able to enter the vehicle on my own. I sank into the leather seat and closed my eyes. There was so much air, so much light, such variety of noise all around. It seemed unimaginable even hours ago. I was certain the coffin was the last thing I would ever lay my eyes on. The graveyard claimed me before death could. No one in the world would know a man was dying.

Before shutting the passenger door, I threw a long glance at the cemetery. Several headstones had been knocked to the ground. Dead flowers were scattered about. And the place where I had been buried was the only gaping hole in the giant graveyard. I realized that my life had etched deep scars into my life and the pain that had been wrought in me made me feel like a living corpse.

As the car sped away, I reminded myself how fortunate I was for having a friend like Dustin. If he hadn't found me, I would have suffered an agonizing death inside my own grave.

Six days after the near-death experience in Caracas, I asked Dustin to locate the surviving family members of the Venezuelan man who had served as a faithful guide. Nicolás had been a good friend and I wanted to repay his debt by assisting his family. The Russian hacker spent several hours scouring the internet for known associates of Nicolás and came across numerous security footages of him and Richard. Cynthia's father was apparently well acquainted with the man. A camera beside a service station in Cúa showed Richard speaking to another man minutes after taking leave from Nicolás. The duo exchanged a folder and the unidentified man drove away in a blue van.

Dustin nearly jumped in his chair. He recognized it as the exact same van that had transported me and Nicolás to the cemetery. The license plate was a match. It was my assailant's getaway car. I couldn't understand why the men who shot Nicolás and buried me alive would be meeting with Richard hours before attacking us. I asked my tech op to investigate the matter further. He confirmed my suspicion. The men who were driving the blue van were apprehended while crossing through the Brazilian border.

The special action forces of the Bolivarian National Police took the men into custody and after intensive questioning, they admitted to being hired by a man whose description matched Richard's. I then realized Cynthia's father had indeed hired those men to have me killed, but the method astounded me. Rather than putting a bullet in the head, why had the men kept me alive and buried me in the same coffin with a dead man? I imagined it was meant to be a psychological torture. Richard was the only person in the world who I had confided into about my innate fear of closed space. He knew I suffered from claustrophobia.

Five years after I first began to work for him, Richard sent me on a mission to Dublin. I was supposed to retrieve a hard drive that contained information about several VIP accounts in a British multinational investment bank. It was the largest bank in Europe so the server was sought by many parties. I was able to make a copy of it but before being able to escape, I was captured. In order to prevent the criminals from getting access to the half trillion pounds that was saved into those VIP accounts, I decided to destroy the server, but before doing that, I memorized the list of account holders' name along with their balance. The total asset was close to one trillion pounds.

After getting captured, I was not treated too kindly. I was placed in a small windowless rectangular room. My captors never entered the room; rather they questioned me via a speaker overhead. They demanded the details that was on the server, but I told them I didn't know anything, but of course, they did not believe me. They threatened to increase the temperature in my cell. It was stifling and painful. My skin burned and itched. Just as I thought this was the worst that could happen to me, the two parallel walls began closing in. The man on the speaker warned me they would slide the four walls until I became completely smothered. I still refused to give them any information. The walls slid closer and closer. I pushed one leg against each wall and climbed to the ceiling, where a ventilation duct afforded me the opportunity to escape.

Upon my return to the United States, Cynthia was pleased to see me. This time, I decided to come clean and tell her about my investigation. I told her how we had proof that Richard had been responsible for my ordeal in Caracas. I showed her the evidence that proved her father had hired men to kidnap and bury me in the Venezuelan cemetery.

Cynthia continued to express displeasure at my quest. She didn't want her stepfather to go to jail. I told her how unfair it was to be so biased. Richard framed me for terrorism and kept me in prison with a life sentence. If I hadn't managed to escape, then who knew how many years I would have remained locked in the dark hole, cut off from the outside world. I was sure she would change her mind about Richard if she saw how he was complicit in planning the attacks of September 11, 2001. The debris was my proof. It contained the exact explosives he smuggled in through the New York harbor eleven months before the attacks. Richard knew I would have been able to stop him and put an end to his plans so he had me removed from the equation. I showed Cynthia that Richard had motive to carry out the attacks. His shares in the oil companies increased exponentially after the Iraq War began. His company won contracts to drill for oil in Baghdad. This man was after money and he was not done.

I was still trying to solve the mystery about the Pakistan missile systems that was being hijacked by unidentified mercenaries. I knew Richard earned a lot of profit from the Afghanistan war and the Iraq war, but I didn't know what he gained by starting a war with Pakistan and the United States. One rather unproductive weekend, I was reading the business news and came across an article that mentioned how the U.S. stock markets were affected by the attacks on September 11, 2001. It named a few companies that had placed put option on specific shares in the stock market. I knew that put option was a guess that a stock will go down while call option was a speculation that a stock will go up. The put options that were placed on stocks days prior to the September 11 attacks raised many questions as to the motive of the actual culprits. The article went on to say how a businessman could profit immensely if he was able to guess right and place put options on the right company.

The attacks of September 11th seemed more like an inside job when I looked at the dates the put options were placed. On September 6th, 2001, put options were placed on United Airlines stocks. Since most put options expire within ninety days, investors have to buy them shortly before they expect the stock's prices to drop. The precise numbers were staggering. The same day, on September 6th, put volume on United Airlines was 3,150, which was more than four times its average daily put volume that year. Put volumes for Boeing on September 7, 2001, totaled 27,294; a huge number. It was more than five times its average daily put volume that year. The day before the attacks, put volumes on American Airlines stock was 4,516, nearly eleven times its average daily volume for the year. The insurance industry, also expected to be hard hit by the effects of the terrorist attacks, saw similar plays on its put options. Citigroup, which had a large insurance arm, and insurance broker, Marsh & McLennan Cos. experienced extraordinarily high out volumes just days before the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. I realized that some people with foreknowledge must have profited from the September 11th attacks but I still was not unsure how Cynthia's father gained from the heinous attack on American civilians.

It began to make more sense when I tracked down Richard's former financial advisor and attorney, Jim Haley, who was serving life in prison for alleged fraud and misappropriation. I paid a personal visit to Jim and told him that I knew about the September 11th attack and also knew Richard was involved in it. I promised to help get him out of prison if he helped me bring Richard down. Jim was reluctant to help me but I later cajoled him to work for me rather than his disgraced employer who had let him rot in jail. After my third visit, the financial advisor agreed to give me the coordinates of a shipping yard. He claimed that Richard and two of his business associates had been coordinating a heist for over a year. They began the operation in early 2000, right before the November presidential election, and had personally campaigned to have someone from the Bush family get elected to the White House. The heist was scheduled for September 11, 2001.

I was eager to learn about the source of the heist. Jim told me that there planned to loot the gold bars that were stashed in the Federal Reserve's storage, under the Twin Towers. In order to execute the plan without raising government red flags, Richard had special dynamite imported in to New York and hired mercenaries to plant the explosives inside the World Trade Center. I told Jim it was impossible for a bunch of thugs to break into a secure building like the Twin Towers and plant bombs. Security would never have given unidentified personnel access to those secure buildings for long hours at a time in order to plant those explosives. It was true, Jim said, but they had inside help. World Trade Center 7 was the third building to be demolished. It was not hit by any airplane but was brought down with explosives. Jim told me the towers were built and owned by Silverstein Properties, a real estate development company founded by Larry Silverstein.

Incidentally, it was Silverstein who ordered the removal of the bomb-sniffing dogs from the building prior to the demolition. Larry Silverstein had the habit of dining in the World Trade Center restaurant with his new tenants every single day since July 26, 2001, but on the day of the September 11th attacks, he didn't go to the building. After the demolition of the Towers, Silverstein managed to maximize insurance proceeds to fund the rebuilding efforts of the WTC. I remembered the London experts who had examined the debris; they assured me that the explosive charges must have been placed in the building beforehand, and it couldn't have been done by amateurs. Extraordinary engineering expertise would have been needed to bring down a 47-story steel skyscraper so neatly.

In order to corroborate this story, I spoke with several American engineers. They couldn't give a solid reason for the collapse of the 47-story, two-million-square-foot building, seven hours after the Twin Towers came down after allegedly colliding with planes. The 9/11 Commission report tried to make it sound as though all three buildings were hit by a plane but that was not so. The independent engineers I consulted with concluded that the steel-framed high rises could only have been brought down by explosives in a procedure known as controlled demolition. The collapse of the three buildings manifested many features of the most difficult type of controlled demolition, known as implosion.

I knew Jim was not lying about the demolition of the Twin Towers but I still needed to know what Richard looted from the underground storage facility and where he stashed the goods that had gone missing from those vaults.

I was surprised to learn that there was so much gold under the Towers. Jim informed me that the Comex metals trading division was storing gold bars for the Bank of Nova Scotia, Chase, Manhattan Bank, the Bank of New York, Hong Kong, and Shanghai Banking,

totaling over a billion dollars. But that was just one company. There was an estimated three hundred billion dollars in gold stored under the World Trade Center. And although a large amount of gold was discovered on November of 2001, Jim insisted it was a decoy. Richard had hired private contractors to use the delivery tunnel underneath World Trade Center 5 to transport the gold to a shipping dock. He had shipped around half of the material to various ports in Europe but the rest were too risky to be transported, so it was still lying in a storage facility at a docking yard.

There was no doubt that the attacks on the WTC was followed by the disappearance of all the gold from its underground vault and Jim told me he knew where Richard had stored his gold stash. He said he would tell me more about the location only after I got him out. It was a risky procedure. Getting a high profile prisoner out of a state penitentiary was dangerous and reckless but I had no choice. I had to stop Richard and could not let him get away with killing so many innocent people in the Twin Towers. The least I could do was to make sure he didn't profit from their deaths.

Two weeks later, Jim accompanied me to the shipping area in New Jersey. Someone must have tipped off Richard of my arrival or he may have suspected that since his financial advisor, Jim Haley had escaped from jail, it meant he gave up his secret location. When I arrived at the docking area, it was too late. Three cargo ships were already on the move; their destination unknown. I leaped on a tug boat and used a Coast Guard symbol to bypass the security to approach the speeding ship. I steered the tugboat closer to the hulk and found my way to the main deck. I managed to get aboard and inspected the shipment. There, carefully disguised as elite furniture, were the thousands of gold bullions that had been stolen from the federal reserve. Richard was hurrying to ship them abroad before the U.S. coast guard managed to intercept him.

I called in Mayday alert but the coast guards said the ship was out of their jurisdiction. I had only several minutes to make my decision. Do I allow Richard and his criminal cohorts to get away with thousands of tons of gold which he would use to kill more innocent people? Or do I destroy his wealth and cripple him financially, and force him out in the open? I made my choice before I realized. I rigged the two massive carriers with explosives before jumping off into the tug boat. I was speeding back to the shore when the explosions began. The Paris bound cargo ship was larger than it appeared, with fifty-thousand ton weighing it down to the dredging water. It took fifty minutes for the ships to completely disintegrate and sink to the bottom of the ocean. On cursory estimation, I guessed that at least a hundred billion dollars' worth of gold was destroyed. I only wished I could see Richard's face when he hears his entire life's loot went down in the Atlantic.

Cynthia's father was more resourceful than I had thought. He got word that his ships had sunk and assumed that I was hot on his trail, so he got moving. He cashed out his assets from numerous banks and had the truckload of cash head towards an underground safehouse that was not on any known. Dustin used every available resource to track down the armored truck and gave me the coordinates. I took an SUV and located the truck. But when I got to the bank's vault location, I noticed three identical trucks were exiting the sublevel. Dustin told me all the cash was in *one* truck, which meant the other two were decoys. Richard had anticipated that I may track this down as well so he planned to confuse me. I couldn't possibly follow all three due to lack of manpower so I had to decide which one contained the cash.

The trucks entered three separate freeways and was speeding away. I tailed one and asked Dustin to hack into the street camera and measure the weight of the trucks by scanning the air pressure of the tires. My guess was the heaviest truck would be containing the cash. The other two must have been empty. The hacker tracked down the heaviest truck and gave me the name of the highway it was on. I increased the speed of my car to catch up in time and waited until I was close enough. Then I used a single bullet to disable the front tire, causing the driver to stop the armored truck. I approached the vehicle and tried to pry open the steel reinforced gate, but it was made from unbreakable bomb proof material. There was no way I would be able to unlock the doors and empty the contents. Again, I had only one choice. I raced back to my car and took a shoulder-launched missile from the trunk. I aimed the weapon at the truck and fired. The armored truck caught fire and I hastily retreated. Even from a distance, I could see the scattered dollar bills flying in the glow. The night was peaceful.

My greatest adversary lost all his life's wealth in less than three days. I didn't expect him to take defeat honorably. Richard would target me sooner or later but I no longer cared. Too many people had died already. Thousands of Americans died in the September 11th attacks on the Twin Towers which Richard and members of his high table coordinated so they could steal the U.S. government's money that was stored beneath the buildings. Cynthia's stepfather also intended to coerce the U.S. Navy to go to war with Pakistan, so he and his partners could profit from the arms sales.

I knew bringing him down wasn't enough. I needed to dismantle his empire and everyone who worked with him. He had innumerable trusted contacts in almost every sector of the government as well as in renowned crime families. Richard met regularly with illegal arms dealers and crime bosses, as well as the CEOs of weapons manufacturers and medical companies. I didn't know how many of his billionaire friends were corrupt but I intended to find out gradually.

I gathered all my findings and forwarded the evidence to a member of the House Intelligence Committee who was conducting investigations on the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The events of that day remain etched on my mind, as though it happened yesterday. I remember the cries and shrieks of the victims and survivors of the murderous attacks on the World Trade Center buildings. I was bursting in rage and despair because I could do nothing to save them. My efforts were being utilized elsewhere. I was in Washington D.C. trying to prevent the men who planned to declare coup on the US government to take over the reins of democracy. I cried so much that day that my eyes hurt and my throat ached fiercely. I was able to disable the bombs that were planted under the White House and effectively removed the explosives which were specifically designed and created using stolen material from an abandoned Soviet era weapons depot in Tbilisi. This, I learned many weeks later, was part of the elaborate coup plan in which the American public and the new military government was going to pin the blame of the 9/11 attacks on Russia. It was some years later that I found out what was the true motive of the man who was adamant on framing Russia for the attacks on American soil in 2001. He was eager to create rift between these two great nations.

From his glass house, Dustin was scrambling with the only two satellites he had access to. He was trying to keep eyes on the projectiles that were flying over the United States. I wanted to save lives of innocent Americans who were certain to die in large numbers that day but I also knew we couldn't allow a coup to take place because that would enable corrupt or inexperienced generals to take command of government and declare martial law. The former first lady who was still the senator of New York was one of the only people in Washington who believed me when I warned them that the capital city was under attack. If she hadn't furnished me with the blue print of the Capitol Building and the White House, I may never have been able to locate and disable the bombs that were planted beneath the historic structures.

However, it was an illusion to imagine that the attacks on America ceased right after the 9/11 attacks of 2001. Months later, another similar attack was scheduled to take place, because those rogue members of the US government who were eager to execute a coup were unhappy with their failure to do so on September 11. They had plans to pulverize the US capital with cruise missiles, but the missiles that were headed to Washington D.C. was neutralized by my computer genius friend. Dustin crash landed the missile on the Somerset county in Pennsylvania. We knew that two other drones were headed to New York City, but at that time, I felt it was more pressing to preserve the democracy.

An incessant beeping broke me from my sleep. It was the emergency pager I had kept for personal use. The guards who were tasked to protect my surrogate Russian mother's family had something urgent to share. I connected to a secure line and called the number. A protective detail officer said he had come across a breach in security. They were able to identify a nighttime prowler who was leaving the Russian woman's home. None of the security personnel saw the stranger enter but they did get a blurry image of the man who had broken into the family's private abode. When I received the image, I thought it looked familiar. I had seen the man before. Dustin tried to help and placed the image through an advanced facial recognition application but it yielded no results. The man didn't exist in any known database. I couldn't shake the feeling that I knew that man. I racked my brains for hours and finally was able to identify the person.

It was several years ago, right after I was released from the two-year kidnapping and torture stint. Cynthia's father was angry with me for refusing to break off relationship with his daughter so he decided to punish me. He had his hired henchmen psychologically and physically break me before allowing them to release my damaged body. The torturers dropped me off in the middle of a busy street in Thailand. I wandered like a zombie for a few days before going to a pub. The man in the blurred image was at a night club where I had gone to meet with a criminal informant. I remembered the gait and body language. This was the man who was accosting me, almost molesting me until I passed out after accepting a drink. I was semiconscious when I realized what he was doing. He was trying to engage in sexual activities with me. In my drugged state, I could not remember much else except that I tried sluggishly to punch him but failed miserably.

The flashbacks from the night became clearer and I was able to remember the man's face clearly. He was speaking Deutsch. It was one of the many languages I had learned at the Soviet training Camp so I conversed with him fluently. It was in this friendly encounter that he slipped drugs in my food and knocked me unconscious. Ever since Richard began his campaign to separate me from Cynthia, he had been sending scores of men to seduce me, hoping I would permanently change my sexual preferences and leave Cynthia alone. This man was one of them. But it still didn't make sense to me why he was being sent after the Russian woman's family. I had considered the woman to be my family ever since I arrived in America in the eighties, but the woman or her husband did not know I existed. I wanted to imagine they were my family but I hadn't seen or met the woman or her six children in years. I preferred to remain as the invisible friend who would protect them and take comfort in the thought that there was a family out there who I could remotely connect to.

I personally flew over to New York City to speak with the security guards. They gave me a more detailed report. They believed multiple break-ins took place in the Russian woman's home and on one occasion, the woman's daughter was targeted. So, it was my sister again. I did fear that Cynthia's father would put a hit on this family again but I believed my security was enough to protect them. Richard seemed determined to capture the teenage daughter. She was to be surrounded and protected but I had underestimated the zeal of the kidnappers. If they managed to sneak into the home under the direct watch of so many of my security personnel, then it was pretty clear that his men were highly skilled and dangerous. I could not allow my sister to be captured and tortured by Richard or his sick perverts, the way they had tortured me back in the nineties. It was better to die than be kidnapped by those men Richard had hired.

It was early 2011 when a group calling themselves ISIL emerged in Iraq. They claimed to be a part of the terrorist cell al Qaeda but were believed to me more sophisticated. The group gained notoriety in Iraq and Syria and began to publish propaganda videos on the internet. As soon as I learned that the terrorist network was a part of al Qaeda, I realized it was a CIA cover-up for something else, something more sinister.

With each year, the activities of ISIL were becoming more intense. After American air force began airstrikes against the network in 2014, the United States conducted nearly nine thousand airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, causing the ISIL to weaken considerably. However, by 2015, ISIL allegedly bombed a Russian passenger plane, killing more than two hundred civilians. The next month, bomb attacks in Paris took the lives of hundreds. Six months later, in June of 2016, a man claiming to be an ISIL member shot and killed scores of people in a Florida nightclub.

So many international incidents were happening and not even the best intelligence agencies in the world were being able to stop it. I knew it wasn't the work of deranged Middle Eastern terrorists but I still couldn't figure out who was pulling all the strings. Was the CIA single handedly conducting all of these terrorist attacks? It was an open secret that al Qaeda was an invention of the Agency which used agents to pose as Jihadis and recruit potential bombers or fanatics. If ISIL or ISIS was part of al Qaeda, then they must have been the creation of our government. But the theatrics were too crude. Real people were dying. Even I doubted that the Agency would sanction such large-scale attack on its own people.

I took the initiative and send word to Richard and apprised him of my suspicions and observation. I told him that the two explosions in the oil fields over the Mediterranean Sea were likely acts of sabotage carried out by the same group who had been spreading violent propaganda in Iraq and Iran. I hoped Richard would use his black ops team of the NSA's zero division to find out the true masterminds of the unrest in the Middle East.

My move was faulty and, in some ways, fatal. I was lounging at a café one morning when my eyes fell on the television screen. It was the hourly news. Police were looking for an armed and highly dangerous man who had been responsible for the bombing of several American-run oil fields. I suppressed a congratulatory smile. At least the authorities were swift to identify the perpetrator. With a sigh of relief, I glanced up once more to look at the face of the suspect. The coffee I was holding fell with a dull thud on the table, spilling the dark contents over my shirt and trousers. The face on the screen was my own! *I was the fugitive!*

I rushed out of the café before anyone recognized me. For eighteen days, I lived the life of a wanted criminal, evading cameras, staying miles away from my apartment or known associates. But on the twentieth day, I could not take it any longer. It had been too long that I hadn't spoken to Cynthia. She would be worried sick about me. I needed to hear her voice and assure her that I was all right. I phoned Cynthia that afternoon and swore to her that I was being framed. With relief, I saw that she readily believed in my innocence. I begged her to see me before I left the State. To my utter delight, she agreed to meet at a clearing in a nearby forest where there would be no cameras or police. I waited eagerly the next morning for our meeting. After scanning the clearing, I took my seat at a worn-down bench over the grass. Minutes later, Cynthia walked towards me. Her luxurious hair bounced softly as she came nearer. I jumped to my feet, getting ready to embrace her for the longest possible time.

But Cynthia slowed her pace. Then stopped.

I frowned, confused. Why was she looking at me so coldly? I could feel my own smile fading away. There was something wrong. I saw Cynthia nodding to someone outside my peripheral vision. The next thing I saw was the barrels of at least fifty drawn guns. The entire forest was encircled. Nearly a hundred police and FBI were waiting in the shadows to catch me. My beloved Cynthia was hurrying away to an armored car, avoiding looking in my direction. I wanted to call out, to tell her I was innocent and that I loved her, but words froze inside my throat. And with an agonizing jolt in my heart, I realized that Cynthia had given me up.

The hurt I felt when she didn't believe me and handed me over to the FBI was more painful than all the tortures I ever faced in my life.

The anguish is indescribable. The feelings that deluge you when the person you love the most in the world does not believe you, that she thinks so ill of you, and looks at you like a stranger- is so utterly painful that I don't think any human would be able to tolerate the rollercoaster of emotions that coursed through my veins.

That day in the forest, something in my inside had died, a part of me died that never came back to life again.

What use was there for me to live on in this world if my beloved Cynthia thought so bad of me? After I risked my life a thousand times for her, she found a reason to abandon me. Cynthia saw me throwing myself innumerable times in death and harm's way in order to save ordinary people, yet she still believed me to be capable of hurting innocents. If she of all the people in the world couldn't love me or trust me then who would ever love me? Who would ever trust me? And what reason would I have to live in this painful world - without any love or confidant?

My identity seemed worthless, my life- futile. There were no great love and memory I could hold on to: nothing to look forwards to, nothing to go back. I had no one.

Still now, I have no benefactor. I have no father; I have no family; I have no wife; I have no children; I have no nationality; I have no country; I have no religion. I came to this world with only one identity and I will leave this life with but one identification in my heart: I am only my mother's son.

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It was another mission sanctioned by the NSA's black budget program.

Cynthia's stepfather gave me clear instructions. I was to retrieve a package from a man in Shizuoka and wait at the extraction point two miles from the city proper. A plane was supposed to fly me to Fukushima where I had to prevent a Chinese mercenary group from releasing untreated radioactive water from the destroyed Fukushima nuclear plant into the sea. The NSA black ops unit received intel suggesting that a thirteen-man team hired by the Chinese Triad will be leading the assault and sabotage the storage tanks that contained the contaminated water and would release a significant amount toxic liquid into the country's drinking water supply as spill the rest of the radioactive waste into the ocean. Richard insisted that the mission was of paramount importance because releasing over a million tons of radioactive water to the Pacific Ocean would cause unprecedented damage to the ecosystem and the hazardous waste would damage sea life.

My contact was supposed to meet me at a brasserie in Shizuoka, a city on the south coast of Japan. I waited for over two hours in the midday sun but when no one showed up, I proceeded to a safehouse near the Nagaoshira Shrine. The place was bare but there was a young woman waiting for me. Her name was Akemi Hashimoto and she said someone had hired her to wait in the safe house until I arrived. I informed the Japanese woman that there must have been a mistake because my contact never showed up at the brasserie and I was not scheduled to meet anyone at the safehouse. Akemi was equally perplexed by the unexpected but she agreed to help me find my contact. We proceeded to travel to the original meeting point but the area was still deserted. I explained that I had to go to the damaged nuclear power plant in Fukushima before rogue criminals succeeded in contaminating Japan's drinking water supplies. For the next week, Akemi acted as my guide and assisted me in purchasing basic supplies such as weapons and bullet resistant gears for the mission.

But the day I was scheduled to leave, I left the safehouse for my morning run, and when I got back, I found Akemi lying on the center of the living room. The room was eerily quiet. I called Akemi but she didn't respond. When I nudged her lightly, her body rolled over and I saw that there were several deep knife-wounds on her torso. And my pocket knife was sticking from the center of her chest. I gagged and fell to the floor. It was impossible. How could she be dead? I left her an hour ago! Who would kill her, using my own pocket knife? I tried in vain to revive the Japanese woman but it was useless. She had bled to death. After helping me for so many days, the woman had to die a meaningless death. I had no doubt whoever killed her was here looking for me and when they didn't find me, they took the life of the helpful woman who had assisted me most selflessly. I was hunched over her still warm corpse when I heard the sound of a blade whizzing past my head. I ducked instinctively, narrowly avoiding a fatal blow to my head. The assailants were wearing dark overalls and cloth masks. From the way they were using the double-edged swords, I could tell they belonged to one of the oldest fighting family. An elongated dragon was printed on the soles of their padded footwear. I recognized that trademark. They were Yakuza!

My heart raced and I evaded several blows before overpowering one of the fighters. I seized his sword. It felt so heavy that I was afraid it would fall. I held one of the men at bay and spoke in English. I explained that I was friend to Japan and meant no harm. One of the attackers replied in English and said the Yakuza avenged their own and now my blood would be spilled in exchange of their girl.

When I expressed my ignorance, one of the attackers tossed the pocket knife at me. "We know you killed the daughter of our leader."

"I didn't kill anyone," I pleaded.

“This team was led by Akemi Hashimoto’s father and now you killed her. We will execute you for it.”

I repeated my innocence but the armed men charged at me with renewed vigor. I barely deflected a blow with my own sword but the impact knocked me to the floor and the blade snapped into pieces. I knew winning this fight was impossible so I ran. It was an arduous struggle. I collapsed at a side road and hid there until sundown. From there, I went to a local store whose elderly owner knew me while I was travelling with Akemi. He trusted me and when I sought his help, the old Japanese man agreed to assist me in escaping the fearsome Yakuza. He waited until midnight, then brought his personal *bekabune*. The wooden planked item was built to be a seaweed gathering boat and the man allowed me to get on the boat and escorted me to the train station. I boarded a train bound for Fukushima and settled in the last compartment.

My trip did not last too long. Minutes after the train started, my compartment was swarming with aggressive looking men. I recognized them from the body arts on their wrists. The elongated dragon tattoo. They were members of the Yakuza, the transnational organized crime syndicates originating in Japan, and each man had my photo with in their hands.

I understood that the Yakuza had started a manhunt for me and nowhere in Japan would I be safe. The search party in the train compartment recognized me right away and were closing in. I kicked the sealed window beside me until it shattered- then I leaped off the moving train into the rail tracks. It was a near miss but I knew I wouldn’t be so lucky next time. I retraced my steps and went back to the old man’s store but the shop was closed. The shutters were down. I made my way inside and slipped on something dark. I knelt and my hands made contact with a silken material. Something solid, cold. A body! It was the kind hearted old man who had helped me escape to the train station hours earlier. Now he was dead. From the dimming light that was seeping in through the window, I saw that the old man’s throat had been slit. He was executed in the Yakuza style for aiding a fugitive.

The massive manhunt now made sense. Akemi Hashimoto was the daughter of one of the most feared leaders of the Japanese mafia and now someone had killed her and frame me for the murder. It was not surprising that her father was dedicating all his resources to locate and execute me. I wanted to flee Japan as soon as the opportunity presented itself, but I felt that it would have been unfair to Akemi. She had been my friend and assisted me in purchasing supplies from local stores. I had to find out who had really killed her so brutally, and why those assassins bothered to use my pocket knife to stab her. The entire situation appeared to have been carefully orchestrated and the real killers wanted the Yakuza to believe I was murderer. I hoped to catch the real culprit and give Akemi’s family the closure they deserved but I was on my own, with no satellite backup, tactical support or safehouses.

It took me three weeks to escape the island of Japan and what pained me the most was that many innocent people died while I was on the run. The Japanese Yakuza leader was able to capture the man who had killed his daughter. He was bankrolled by a shell company that was associated with Blacksand Security Contractors. During interrogation, the man admitted to the Yakuza that he was ordered by Richard to kill Akemi and frame me for the murder. It was for this reason that he made sure to use the pocketknife that had my fingerprints all over it to kill the innocent Japanese girl. I wish I could save her. I earnestly wished the bloodshed would stop and I could live in peace again.

July, 2013

Gary Huntington had joined the US Army as an Infantryman and was assigned as a rifleman in the 75th Ranger Regiment. He served as a sniper team leader until November 2007, the year he completed a specialized selection course and joined the Delta force. During one of his overseas missions, he had come across Richard’s private contract killers and prevented them from assassinating a prominent Middle Eastern envoy. Ever since he foiled Richard’s plot, he came under the radar of Blacksand kill team who made numerous attempts on his life. It was Gary who had first approached me about a suspicious encounter he had with two members of the Blacksand Security Contractor. The mercenaries were executing Iraqi police officers in order to cover up a bank heist. Gary realized the private security company was not legitimate and lodged formal complaints with the military’s upper echelons. In the years that followed, the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence held numerous closed-door meeting concerning the questionable actions of Blacksand and ordered the U.S. military to cancel their contract with them.

When I discovered Richard had traveled numerous times to China in the past year and was attempting to liquidate all his assets that were stored in US and EU banks, I knew he was planning something sinister. I wanted to fly to China to find out his plans, but it was harder said than done. I was technically still a fugitive. Richard had made sure there would always be a hot on my back. Due to my Russian background, Richard had led the U.S. government to believe I was a threat. I couldn’t just board a passenger plane to China without alerting Homeland Security or the FBI. I needed help from someone I could trust. I asked the Russian hacker to locate Gary Huntington. Dustin had tracked down Gary’s file and offered him a chance to assist us in this mission. He agreed to accompany me on

this stealth operation outside the United States. We arrived in the Bao'an District early Saturday morning. Dustin had already booked us a king suite at a five-star hotel in the Zhongshan Shi subdistrict.

I gave Gary a preliminary background information about Richard and how he operated on foreign soil.

"Where did Richard get the money to start a large-scale international program like the ISIS? I mean this thing had to cost a lot of money. To make the terrorist cell look real, he had to hire hundreds of mercenaries, give fake bombings in different countries, purchase weapons, make those repulsive propaganda videos, air beheadings on live television and the list goes on. Richard couldn't have done it all by himself." Gary Huntington continued resolutely. "He had help. What's the Polish dude's name who admitted to making several of the ISIS promotion videos?"

"Maciej Błaszczak?"

"Yeah, him. That guy said he had specific instructions to make ISIS appear as though it was run by Russian mercenaries. He was supposed to make hundreds of sex-jihad slave camps in Iraq and Syria and claim Russian sex traffickers controlled all the human smuggling operations. That's why he named all his fictional criminals Russian pseudonyms."

Dustin cleared his throat. "Oh, in case you are wondering. I tracked Błaszczak. He is currently the president of the Europa Institute of the University of Utrecht."

"A professor who is a terrorist? Touché." Gary commented.

I ignored him and addressed Dustin. "I thought it was Bruno Grünewälder who told us he was supposed to make ISIS look worse than Nazis. Isn't that the reason Grünewälder named all the sex-jihad camps *Naza Love camps*, after those Nazi brothels the Germany Army liked to refer to as love camps?"

"I don't think Richard told him all the details." Gary observed. "Bruno came up with all those brilliant plans himself. Dude's German after all. You can't blame him for trying to make his old Nazi heroes look good by creating something that would seem far worse, like ISIS beheadings and sex slavery. Bruno Grünewälder received millions of dollars for that."

"Right, that's my point exactly! Richard gave Grünewälder millions. Hundreds of millions, in fact." Dustin said, his voice shrill.

Gary was scowling. "How did Richard get his hands on that kind of money without alerting IMF or the world banks?"

"I might have an answer to that question," the hacker offered. "I use a software that is linked to the darknet. It scours the news, the blogosphere, basically the entire internet and flags anything that is linked to Richard or Blacksand. I found something interesting. Do any one of you remember the capture of Libya's deposed leader, Muammar Gaddafi?"

"It was in 2011, right?" Gary said.

The Russian hacker nodded. "I intercepted some chatter that took place in October 2011, between Blacksand executives who were discussing how Gaddafi did not cooperate even after being tortured and he gave up the location of his stashed gold bullion and bank account information only after they sodomized him repeatedly. From the sound of it, it seems that Gaddafi wasn't captured by the Libyan forces as the media was led to believe. Richard's men took him first and tortured information out of him."

"Does the transcript mention what else they tortured out of the Libyan leader?" I inquired.

"Almost thirty separate bank account numbers. According to the messages, Muammar Gaddafi gave Blacksand operatives information to access around two hundred billion dollars."

"He had that much money?" The soldier let out a sad whistle.

"He likely had more stashed up," I thought aloud, "but Richard was undoubtedly concerned about the media narrative. Gaddafi wasn't just an ordinary Bedouin so he couldn't be made to disappear. My guess is after squeezing all the information out of him, Richard dumped his body to the Libyan forces."

"The National Transitional Council of Libya claimed credit for Gaddafi's capture but they could never explain the torture marks on his body," Dustin read from the screen. "A sealed autopsy report shows that Gaddafi was tortured with surgical precision, designed to keep him alive. The Libyan forces later said he died from injuries sustained in a firefight."

"Wow! It's classic and cliché at the same time." Gary gesticulated energetically as he spoke. "Richard used billions of dollars he stole from Gaddafi to create his own little terrorist cell ISIS."

"So, he deposited millions onto random accounts and hired volunteers to blow themselves up?" I put the question to no one in particular.

"I wouldn't call them random accounts," the hacker corrected me. "Almost all of the account that funded individual terrorist attacks linked to ISIS came from VIP bank accounts in the Otkritie FC Bank, the Sberbank of Russia, the VTB Bank and the Gazprombank, which is the third largest bank in the Russia."

"Richard went out of his way to make sure ISIS looks like a Russian terrorist cell." Gary Huntington threw a worried glance at me. "I wonder why he would do that."

I sighed. "Richard knows about my Russian background. I guess he still thinks I am loyal to Russia."

"That's a very vengeance-filled thing to do," Gary exclaimed. "I guess he plans to make America and the whole world believe Russia is behind ISIS so that the international community votes to slap Moscow with sanctions or even invade the country."

I nodded wearily. "Dustin and I worked really hard to prevent the hundreds of attacks Richard had planned to execute across America. In 2015 alone, I stopped nearly thirty major attacks. Almost all of them were designed to be perpetrated by Chechen or Russian nationals. And ever since he found out about the family I adopted, the Russian woman in New York, he also thinks I am loyal to Moslems, because the Russian woman's husband was from East Pakistan. It was a part of his agenda to hurt me, so he hired an author to write a book Satan's verses. It was one of the many things Richard had done to cause me pain."

Gary rubbed his palms together. "All right, let's get to the bottom of the crisis in China, shall we?"

Dustin printed copies of Blacksand manuals so we could prep for our mission. We discussed the best ways to neutralize the threat Richard posed without alerting the Chinese government of our presence. If Beijing found out American black op team members were in their country without proper authorization, then they would not hesitate to spark an international row with the White House.

I was acquainted with the East Asia director of Amnesty International. He provided me with a list of three thousand private security companies that conduct business in China.

Gary was perusing the report. "China has more than three thousand private security companies under its employment," he read from my report. "Why is Blacksand special?"

"Although it was not uncommon for China to use foreign expertise to protect its empire, I didn't expect them to hire a criminal group like Blacksand and allow them access inside their inner security circle," I informed him, detailing the criminal charges Blacksand and its operatives have faced in the past five years. "They are practically mercenaries, responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians. Richard uses Blacksand for assassinations, money laundering, privatization fraud, intimidation and extortion."

Knowing Richard, I wasn't overly surprised to hear that Blacksand Security Contractor had a bold presence in the country. Officially, Blacksand was listed as an affiliate of Beijing Security Channel, a state-owned Chinese enterprise that paid eight hundred million dollars to Blacksand since the past year.

Dustin interrupted my thoughts. "Listen to this. Blacksand purchased shares in Jeignlei Dynamics, a state-owned Chinese enterprise that holds thirty percent of the military assets. They are local celebrities now."

"Can you track their headquarters?" I asked the hacker. "I want to know the real reason Richard is sending his best private security team to China."

"I identified two Blacksand bases in China. One is in Wuhan. The larger one is in Xinjiang." Dustin scrolled through his screen.

"What are they doing in Xinjiang?" I asked the hacker.

"Unless I am mistaken, it seems like Richard is planning to open another black op division in this region."

"League 13." I muttered under my breath. "It was a black op program under the jurisdiction of the NSA. Richard created it and he was its director."

"How do you know about the League?" Gary asked. His eyes brimmed with curiosity.

"Because I was part of it." I said simply. "Richard had recruited me when I arrived in America as a sleeper agent. He convinced me to change sides."

"You were FSB?" Gary asked.

I sniffed. "FSB didn't exist at that time. It was KGB. And I *believed* I was working for the Soviet government, except I wasn't. The man I worked for was former KGB colonel who had gone rouge years before he recruited me. The colonel had a network of organized training Camps all over the Eastern Bloc. Few months after I began my training, he shipped the recruits to a medieval castle in East Germany. It was his primary base of operations."

"Okay, the meet is on." Dustin announced.

"Where?" I asked, getting to my feet.

The Blacksand operative who had requested my help in getting out of China was offering new information about Richard's endgame in China and he agreed to meet in person.

Dustin printed a copy of the local area map. "Our contact agreed to be on a side street, thirteen yards south of the Dakenghu Reservoir. He'll be holding today's issue of the Dongguan Times. I think only one of you should go. Otherwise, it might spook him to see a cavalry."

"I'll go," I volunteered.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing face to face with a middle-aged man who wore a straw hat over his thinning auburn hair.

"I am Conrad," he said nervously when he saw me.

I nodded. "Thanks for being here, Conrad. You said you had information?"

"Yes, and you'll need to act fast if you want to stop it from happening!"

"Stop *what* from happening?" I asked, bewildered.

"As we speak, Richard is feeding compromising classified intel to the Communist Party's helmsman."

"Could you care to elaborate what information that is?" I pressed.

Conrad swallowed. "Look, Richard was gloating the other day, and told us since relations with Washington and Beijing have reached a new low, due to disputes over trade and human rights, it was the perfect time to sell the information. Basically, Richard has offered the Chinese government to use Blacksand operatives to eliminate the presence of all CIA undercover operatives in their country."

"That's impossible!" I almost shouted. "Blacksand contractors may be mercenaries but they are still Americans. How could they kill their own?"

Conrad laughed bitterly. "Blacksand is no longer affiliated with the U.S. government. We are an independent entity and right now, our allegiance officially is with Beijing because that is who is supplying us with weapons right now."

"Why is Blacksand making its base in China?" I wanted to know.

Conrad looked mournful. "After the US military fired our company, Blacksand lost all assets. The government took away our license, so Richard panicked and he found an eager customer in China."

"He told us he was prepared to make deals with the devil in order to keep his security firm running."

"So, Conrad, tell me what was the deal?" I asked pointedly. "What was it that Richard offered the Chinese government that made them agree to work with Blacksand? They must have known that Blacksand operatives were responsible of murdering dozens of Chinese politicians."

"I don't know what Richard ultimately hopes to achieve, but he told the China's Communist Party that if they agreed to invade the Russian Federation, he would gift them three trillion US dollars."

"Invade Russia?" I gasped. It was the most horrifying thing I'd heard in years. "That makes no sense, Conrad! China and Russia are allies."

"True, but Richard said that was his only demand. If they agreed to invade Russia, he would facilitate the entire operation and wire them the promised money. In addition to that, he offered to kill all the CIA assets in mainland China so they could be free from foreign *interference*."

"What's going to happen when the Chinese realize Richard doesn't have three trillion dollars with him?" I argued.

Conrad looked mildly surprised. "But he has. Or had. Because eight months ago, he wired three trillion dollars to the People's Bank of China."

I shook my head to dismiss the man's claim. "We both know very well that the American government monitors every single transaction that takes place from the United States."

Conrad gave a small smile. "The Treasury Department monitors all international financial transactions made by citizens of the United States. Richard is aware of that."

"Then how did he send that kind of money?"

"Richard knew he could not transfer so much money into mainland China without alerting the IRS," Conrad told me. "The government and DHS in particular would have flagged the transaction right away and opened a lengthy investigation. The only way he would be able to pull off something so massive was by disabling the monitoring agency's servers temporarily and use the IRS accounts to transfer the money. So, it looked like the money came directly from the US government treasury."

"So, they already have the money?" I asked. "China has the three trillion dollars now?"

Conrad nodded gravely. "And they kept their word and supplied Blacksand with generous contracts. The deal was China will declare war on Russia and invade it from the south, while Richard's elite security team will provide logistical support to the Chinese Army."

"So, this is what he had planned?" My teeth were clenched so tightly I thought it would break. "When is the Russian invasion scheduled?"

"It's a work in progress," Conrad informed me. "Richard told the Chinese government that Russians would not be too happy to get invaded by China, so they needed a solid plan to contain dissent. He offered the Communist Party to build concentration camps along the Russia-China border."

"Why?"

“He planned to house at least ten to twenty million Russians in those slave labor camps. Our architects helped design some of them. The ones in Xinjian were supposed to be prototypes of the actual camps.”

“You are saying the mass interment of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang was Richard’s idea?”

“Not entirely,” Conrad said. “It was an experimentation of the concentration camps. The Chinese authorities decided to use it for something profitable since the construction was already complete. Once the war with Russia began, those camps would have housed only Russian nationals.”

My face was quivering as I addressed Conrad. “Look, man, Richard overlooked something. He didn’t take into account that Russia is a nuclear power who could wipe China into a dust ball in minutes.”

Conrad moistened his lips. “Richard said he has that angle under control, because there are around fifty Russian politicians and senior State Duma deputies who are under his direct payroll. Some have been threatened while others were paid generously to ensure their loyalty. He will use Blacksand operatives to silence the others if they give trouble. And it will be the perfect puppet government.”

“What is his obsession with these concentration camps?”

“Richard likes to call Russians- sorry about that- but he always insists they are savages who has to be controlled by caging them in labor camps. I am not sure why he was so desperate to do that, but he did say something about using Russian slave labor for business endeavors. He also made similar offer to Mongolia. Their government already began the construction of several massive internment camp along the Mongolia–Russia border. To me, it seemed as though he wanted to make China the next Nazi Germany.”

“So, what did you find out, buddy?” Gary asked me once I returned from the meeting place.

“After the US military cancelled all contracts with Blacksand, Richard began to look for other customers. His first stop was China. Richard still had access to CIA’s data servers and used this information to gain the trust of the Chinese Communist party leaders. He assured them he would make their country free of CIA interference if they agreed to employ his team and award Blacksand all of their military contracts. Blacksand operatives killed the CIA officers who were officially listed in Langley and sold the identities of undercover CIA agents in mainland China and one by one, the operatives began to get arrested or killed by the Chinese authorities.”

Gary sank on one of Dustin’s inflatable couches. “I don’t get this at all. Hey, what if this is all farfetched? It could be fake news, right? No way China would agree to invade Russia at the behest of an f*****g lunatic like Richard.”

“Since 2012, when Richard first publicized ISIS, he has urged China to annex Siberia, and the Magadan Oblast. Conrad told me the Chinese government will gradually move hundred fifty million Chinese into the Russian side of the Amur River.”

“Guy wasn’t lying,” Dustin swiveled in his chair. “They already began a peaceful invasion where seventeen million Chinese already moved to the border oblast in Russia.”

“How come the local government didn’t notice anything?” I asked, exasperated.

“That is because the region bordering Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan are pretty deserted. Right now, less than six million Russians live in entire Siberia.” The Russian hacker said.

Gary Huntington spoke almost to himself. “Richard was the super mercenary here. He wanted to monetize war so he wired Chinese government three trillion dollars directly from the state treasury, so no one would be able to stop him, and then he begins his crusade against Russia.”

“And me.” I said quietly.

Dustin paled. “I hadn’t expected his vengeance to go so far.”

“Dustin, I need you to help me track down Richard. Go over the money trail from the Blacksand accounts that you have tracked so far. Any notable wire transfers, anything suspicious. Find it.”

“I am not seeing any notable transfers, but there is an update on the IG page of one of the Blacksand operative.”

“Update?” I repeated.

“A rocket carrying a Beidou-3GEO3 satellite just lifted off from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center.”

“Give me the location of the center.” I told the hacker.

“The spaceport is located in Zeyuan Town. I can arrange a helicopter for the two of you.”

Gary cleared his throat. “Don’t mean to impose, but how about I go to Zeyuan Town. Trust me, I know the area. During training, my Delta team remained in the area for a reconnaissance to search for a Blacksand Security contractor who was believed to have gone rogue. We didn’t find him but I was able to get familiar with the landscape.”

“Yes, you go and check the spaceport. I am sure the satellite China launched is related to Blacksand. Richard may be using it for secure communication.”

“Or remote launch of nuclear weapons,” Gary suggested darkly.

I suppressed a shudder and addressed the Russian hacker. “If we can locate China’s defense-industrial facilities, we can stay ahead of any potential launch. We cannot let Richard use their weapon arsenal against Russia. The Federation won’t stand a chance against a full Chinese assault.”

Dustin resumed his search wordlessly. After several moments, he glanced up. “I was able to log in to the BeiDou Navigation Satellite system, and it doesn’t look too good.”

“What did you find, Dustin?”

“The satellite that was recently launched was fitted with a specific set of coordinates, meaning its only job was to monitor the areas over the said locations.”

I felt weak and my head wobbled. The thought alone was too frightening. Could a nuclear war be on the horizon? I never wanted to believe that Russia would be targeted by someone as determined as Richard. He wanted to hurt me and this was his chance to destroy my native land.

I leaned closer to the monitor and asked tentatively. “And the locations are?”

“The satellite is hovering over Grekhova in the Irkutsk Oblast and also giving periodic feedback from a region in Udachny. That is a town in Mirninsky District. There is also a lot of movement in Erzin. I can’t understand why. The Erzinsky District of Tuva is a plain area, a rural locality. Why is a Chinese satellite dedicated to that location?”

I asked Dustin to pull up the location on the map. I noticed that Erzin was bordering Mongolia. The Blacksand operative had mentioned earlier that Richard had offered Mongolian authorities generous supplies of untraceable weapons in exchange for their cooperation in invading Russia.

Conrad was vague about Richard’s ulterior plan but it had begun to make more sense. Dustin downloaded several additional images on his computer. I noticed the photos showed troop accumulation on the eastern and western end points of the Mongolia–Russia border.

“Talk to me, Dustin. What am I looking at?”

“Chinese satellites recorded these images.” The Russian hacker enlarged a photo. “They were taken during the past few months. According to these photos, there has been a mass mobilization of Chinese troops along Heihe, a city of the northern Heilongjiang province, located on the Russian border, on the south bank of the Heilong Jiang river. It is directly across the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk. Another Chinese infantry unit can be seen moving stealthily across the Amur River, heading to the Tambovsky District.”

I stifled a gasp and spoke to myself. “Richard convinced the Chinese government to launch a nuclear warhead over Russia and seize the Magadan Oblast. Why are troops moving in as we speak?”

Dustin was shaking his head. “Why would China agree to attack its friend? Russians are their allies!”

“Richard had succeeded in manipulating far smarter nations to take more drastic actions in the past,” I told him quietly. “The Chinese government had suffered several trillion-dollar losses in recent years. They are also facing severe shortages of food and grain, so this is their chance to move into Russian cities and seize food from the neighbors. But we will have to find a way to stop it.”

“Why is Mongolia helping China out?” Dustin asked. “I noticed the accumulation of Mongolian troops on the Russian border as well.”

“Conrad mentioned that a number of entrepreneurs based in Ulaanbaatar launched a joint-venture with Chinese state-based companies including Blacksand Security. Before the actual Chinese invasion, they promised to seize Magadan Oblast quietly the under the guise of local businesses.”

The Russian hacker rolled his head to stretch his shoulders. “I’ve never been to Magadan. Do you know why everyone is after it? Is it special?”

“Magadan is a prized piece of land.” I informed my friend. “It contains the world’s richest mining areas, and it also lies beside the Sea of Okhotsk, which is one of the most productive regions of the world’s oceans.”

“Where are you headed?” Dustin said in alarm when he noticed I was preparing my travel bag. “And why all those guns?”

I sighed. “Look, I can’t stop Richard by myself and if I wait for Gary to return, it may be too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“The CIA operatives whose names Richard leaked to the Chinese secret police. If I don’t warn them soon, they Blacksand security contractors will execute or capture them one by one.”

“Wouldn’t it be more sensible if we told the CIA that their agents in China have been compromised?”

“If the Agency finds out operatives have been exposed, then they would pull out all assets from China, which would be a colossal loss for the U.S. government. Some of the CIA officers have been in their undercover jobs for years, collecting data and establishing

rapport. All of it would be lost. I will warn them one by one and tell them to remain in a safehouse until we neutralize all of the Blacksand assassins. Besides, we need them to be inside China in case Richard succeeds in making China invade Russia.”

Dustin frowned thoughtfully. “Do you think that is what Richard wanted in the first place? To make CIA pull out all of their assets from mainland China?”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because, strategically it would make sense. Once CIA is gone, Richard would not have to worry about the U.S. government retaliating or shutting down his organization. If no Agency operative are kept in China, who would report on him and let the State Department know what he is up to? Blacksand contractors would be the only foreign forces strutting around the streets of Beijing.”

For the next six months, I was in a state of shock as I continued investigating the Chinese plot of invading Russia. My contacts at the State Duma made emergency contact with their Chinese counterpart and ultimately came to some sort of agreement which I was not privy to.

I sincerely hoped that this war would never take place.

Meanwhile, the attacks on my person did not cease. I often found my face on wanted posters, accused of crimes I had never heard of.

It became an ugly norm. At least once every month, Cynthia’s stepfather would hire someone to frame me for a bombing that he himself ordered or carried out. Occasionally, I had to run to court and prove my alibi in order to have a case dismissed. There were many Pentagon official who knew that I had enemies who were constantly framing me of absurd activities, but the attempts never ceased. Often, I would be targeted more than once in a month- sometimes, the assailants tried to kidnap me in order to drop me off at the place of the crime or attack so that when I regained consciousness, the authorities would believe I was guilty.

Initially, I believed that the attacks were a coincidence. I didn’t want to believe that Richard was behind all of the assaults on me and my friends. How could he spend all his time and efforts in order to undermine my credibility? It was illogical. But some of my friends who worked at police precincts confirmed the harsh truth. They found out that it was indeed Richard who had been framing me. I didn’t know what he wanted from me, but he seemed determined to drive a wedge between me and his stepdaughter.

When I discovered that it was Richard who was carrying out acts of terrorism and pinned the blame on me, I did not tell Cynthia. I knew she loved Richard as a real father and the thought that he was capable of such petty deeds would have devastated her mind, so I wanted to keep her in the dark and handle the crisis alone.

It was not always so simple. Oftentimes, the effects of a false flag attack were far reaching. Richard didn’t merely target myself, but he went after my loved ones. On one occasion, he tried to kill my friend and left a gun with my prints on them. He wanted my friend to believe that I had tried to kill him. I wanted to keep my friends safe so I hesitantly sought out Cynthia’s help and told her what her stepfather was doing. I hoped she would be able to help me against Richard’s plans. Cynthia was initially skeptical about my claims but after searching through her father’s apartment, she discovered evidence that he had framed me for several low-key arson attacks on several cities in south-east United States.

Although I was able to save myself from a potential life or death sentence due to Cynthia’s help, I still felt reluctant to consort with her on issues related to her stepfather. I became tired of telling her each time Richard tried to kill me. I was sick and tired of telling her how bad her father was, or how much he hated me. I didn’t want her relationship with her stepfather to become strained on my account. I also knew involving Cynthia may have been counterproductive, because when she asks Richard about it, he will be swift to accuse me of lying. For the most part, I didn’t tell her and fought for my life and freedom alone.

September, 2014

I was able to overcome the deluge of obstacles planted by Richard and was finally able to participate in the happiest moment of my life. I married Cynthia in a private civil ceremony and a week later, we went to an Orthodox church to officiate the union. I was ecstatic. Cynthia looked breathtaking in her ivory gown and I was mesmerized by her grace and beauty. We would be together forever now. My eyes followed her as she glided to the altar where I was waiting. Everything was happening perfectly on schedule.

Then we heard the noise. Earsplitting roar of concrete crumbling. The giant painted glass window of the church was smashed, sending shards flying over the altar. I flung myself across Cynthia to shield her from the glass fragments. Something hot was trickling over my face. Shattered glass of the giant window had cut me in several places, blinding me in my own blood. Cynthia cried in fright. I dragged her from harm’s way and shoved her beneath the long bench seats. I peered up to see the priest cowering in the open. He looked shellshocked. I ran to rescue him but another roar shook the church. The explosion ripped the roof apart and send debris over our heads. I glance up to see half of the ceiling was gone. Daylight was streaming in. The priest was lying flat on the floor, his hands pressed against

his ears. I reached his side and dragged him from under the open ceiling- just in time- because the steady rattle of automatic machine gun was now echoing through the torn roof, sending live rounds to every inch of the area we had just occupied. It was madness! I have never seen a bloodbath like this in years. And to face such carnage on a wedding venue was doubly disconcerting.

My primary concern was Cynthia's safety and I knew we had to take cover in the rear parking space outside. The exit was twenty feet behind me so I grabbed Cynthia and the priest and charged for the door. Even as we moved, I saw another large chunk of roof fall to the floor. We tried to scramble away from the giant clumps of falling concrete and bricks but a bloodcurdling scream sounded from the rear of the church. In my desperation to save Cynthia, I had neglected to remember that my dear friends were inside the church as well who had come for the wedding. I thrust Cynthia and the priest out the exit gate, instructing them to get as far away as possible from the church and returned to the rubbles.

I peered through the thick black smoke and noticed the wailing writhing figure atop a mound of concrete. A piece of twisted metal support from the partially demolished ceiling had fallen over the body of my friend Dustin, pinning him to the dusty bricks. I shouted his name, trying to elicit a response but he was unconscious and breathing laboriously. He was trapped. Dustin would die if didn't get him to a hospital!

"Dustin!" I shouted again, slapping his cheek. There was no answer. Something wet stuck to my hand. It was blood! Through burning eyes, I tried to locate the source of the wound. He had suffered a mild injury on his neck. I desperately hoped it was not be serious.

I proceeded to claw away the rubble with my bare hands, freeing his upper body from the concrete. Dustin began to stir, semiconscious. The metal rod pinning his leg to the bricks was not budging so I tugged harder, eventually yanking the metal out of his leg muscles, freeing his leg.

Once I was away from the carnage, and Dustin was safe inside a hospital, I began to inspect the ruins of the church, studying the shell casing, trying to find a clue as to who the perpetrators were. I was not too successful. The attackers used weapons purchased from black market arms dealer meaning it could not be easily tracked or traced to its original owner. On Cynthia's insistence, I postponed my search and went on a pre-planned honeymoon with my beloved bride. Despite the trauma of the wedding day, Cynthia was overjoyed to spend a week in Paris. We rode bike together, ate in restaurants and planned for our future.

Dustin called the hotel switchboard one night. My hacker friend who was recovering from his leg injury told me while I was honeymooning in Paris, he was trying to find out who was responsible for the attacking on my wedding day. It seemed that Dustin was able to get hold of several stealth satellite images that showed the vehicles our assailants had used. One of the armored trucks that was used to launch explosives into the church was registered to an Austrian arms dealer. Dustin ran a background check on the man and found out that he was Richard's childhood friend who had gone to the same primary school in Hamburg. I knew Richard was originally from Austria-Hungary but I didn't want to believe that he would do something so drastic like bombing a church just because I was determined to marry his stepdaughter. The news that Richard had tried to kill me along with my friends in order to prevent me from marrying Cynthia disturbed me so much that I lost the energy to carry on the vacation. The next day, I cut short the honeymoon and returned to the United States.

My dear friend Dustin was already busy at work, trying to find out the source of several attacks that rattled the security network of the national government. He contacted me regularly to keep me apprised of his findings. I often found his reports redundant but the familiar tone of his voice provided me a crucial relief from the constant disturbance of my own life.

Dustin was the only remnant I had of my past life. He and I had been inseparable since we met in the former KGB colonel's training Camp in Russia. I was a wild-eyed novice who knew nothing about technology but Dustin was patient and taught me how to use a computer. He knew I was technically a foreigner and helped me assimilate into the Russian culture and understand the broader society.

My arrival in Soviet Russia was deluged in desolation. I did not want to be there. I was assailed by homesickness but I also had no desire to return to England. There was nothing left for me in London. All those I loved were gone. My home was where my mother was- and she had departed from earth, leaving me abandoned in this cold world. Distant relatives arrived from Moscow and shipped me off to houses in the remote corners of cities like Kuntsevo, Zvenigorod or Rameshki, where I ended up living for brief periods before being expelled yet again. The family members rejected the legitimacy of my birth and refused to care for me. I was ordered to leave at once. This time, my destination was a state orphanage in Siberia.

The name meant nothing to me, the people were strangers and the land was unknown. I could speak Russian sparingly, but until then had not learned to read or write the language. My dear mother would speak to me in her native tongue, teaching me traditional folk songs like *Oh, Moroz, Moroz* or the *Kalinka* music. Whatever I learned about Russian heritage was from her. She described the steppes and how the Cossacks, Kalmucks and the Tatars survived in the rough landscape. My mother, who was an avid ballerina, was besotted

with music, and she read exotic stories from the music of Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov, and Tchaikovsky and introduced me to named such as Prishvin, Tolstoy, Gorky and Pushkin. But beyond that, I was uninterested in learning about her native land, knowing well that I would never end up living in her Soviet wonderland.

Life had alternate plans for me and her death caused me to be banished to her homeland. My first impression of Russia was that it was an enormous, unpopulated, poverty-stricken country with endless winters and horrific rains. I was struggling to survive in a place called Siberia. All I knew about the place was that it must be a magic land of enchanting forests and peculiar warrior hunters who reigned majestically in the endless snow-covered forests and sang songs with the hunting wolves. But the reality I experienced had very little semblance to the folk tales I had heard.

In the dank orphanage of Siberia, despair threatened to overpower me but I braved the cold, frostbite, lice, scabies and dysentery and struggled to survive. I gradually came to form strong bonds with fellow orphans in the State-run center and the suffering of my young comrades instilled in me some sort of moral responsibility. If I left them to their fate, they would perish from malnutrition, neglect and sheer winter cold. I had to remain with them and help them. And so I adopted an adventurous life and began to roam about neighboring villages and fish markets to search for clothes, food or supplies that could help my comrades survive.

My quest did not last forever. I got older and wiser. Ambition kicked in and I collaborated with other teenagers and decided to secure large amounts of money for the upkeep of the orphanage and the young comrades who were languishing in the dilapidated conditions.

The plan was flawless- my comrades would raid an abandoned warehouse and seize some supplies of treated fur. I would stay in the perimeter, guarding the exits. But as it turned out, the warehouse was not deserted and a firefight ensued, killing one of the night guards. I later found out that the guard had drawn his weapon and threatened to shoot one of my comrades who panicked and attempted to wrestle the gun away, causing it to accidentally go off. The children all ran away in confusion but I could not bear to see the white-haired night guard bleed to death so I remained behind, trying to stop his bleeding and keeping him awake.

I hoped to save him but it was too late. The guard lay groaning on the ice-cold ground, blood streaming from his body. It looked as if his ribs had shattered. I didn't want to imagine the pain he must have been feeling. I gripped his hands in mine, hoping to warm them, and my activity awakened him from unconsciousness. His eyes flew open and locked into mine briefly as he made jerky movements with his face, gesturing at me with a pained resignation. He blamed me for his death, I thought with horror. His accusing eyes blinked twice before becoming sightless and the hand that was enveloped within my palm became very cold.

The old man's dying groans pierced my heart but eventually he fell silent. The man stopped moving after a while and with a heavy heart, I prepared to return to the orphanage and rejoin my comrades, but fate had other plans.

Local police were waiting for me at the door and arrested me without hesitation. My hands that were dripping in the old guard's blood were twisted behind me as I was roughly led to the prison van. I was accused of murder. I pleaded innocence and unsurprisingly, the court ruled that I was guilty. The damning evidence all pointed to me. The police had found me crouching over the corpse, my hands and clothes were covered in blood and I was all alone in the warehouse. When the death sentence was awarded to me, I was privately relieved that this would be the end to all the misery I had faced in my life, but I was wrong, because the torment had just begun.

A secret black ops division of the KGB faked my death in prison and brought me to their Camp to be trained as a Soviet spy or so I was told. It would be many years later that I would learn the truth: that the Camp was not an official center for the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* at all, but was being run by a former KGB colonel who had gone rogue and was wanted by the Soviet and American authorities alike.

My training camp in Russia was the epitome of pain and destruction and for me, it was worse than death. But like every terrible thing in life, the Camp gave me something I could never have found elsewhere. I became acquainted with Dustin, the brilliant young hacker, who had been forcibly employed by the former KGB Colonel and was the chief technical instructor for the recruits. He taught me the basic knowledge about computer and made me appreciate technology in all its complexity. While I was grateful for his help, I had no desire to remain in the Camp and become a spy.

All I wanted for myself was an unconditional freedom; not spying, fighting or marauding. Every day, I would wake up, promising myself that I would go out to fulfill the Colonel's orders and as soon as the errand was complete, I would run away. I knew the Colonel had implanted an explosive tracker in the base of my skull and if I disappeared without an explanation, he would not hesitate to activate the kill switch, turning my head into a ball of fire. But I preferred death over serfdom.

When morning came, I would be tasked to lead a team of fresh recruits on a high-risk mission whose probability of success was less than one percent. One by one, I would hear screams of fear and see them perish under enemy fire, disappearing in the acrid smoke of mortar fires, cut down by automatic weapons or being captured by a ruthless foe who followed no rules of war. I knew being captured by

those mafias or criminals was worse than death, so I always returned from my carefully planned retreat and offered my trainees cover fire and rescued whoever I was able to save. My escape had to be postponed for another day.

Upon return to the Sector, the colonel would conduct detailed debriefing and if he detected the slightest inconsistency in our narrative of the operation, he would send the guilty party to the gray room, either to be brutally interrogated or killed. Many times, I would try to take the blame of a faulty operation in order to spare the young recruits but that didn't always work. In more than one case, I noticed that the computer hacker deliberately gave the Colonel false information in order to save my life. He would hack the cameras in which I could be seen fleeing or taking illegal detours and deleted those images so that the colonel never found out I was trying to run away. I owed the Russian hacker my life.

Meanwhile, the attacks kept coming. ISIS was claiming responsibility for over twenty-three bombings including London Metro bombing, Munich stadium attacks, Copenhagen shootings, and the truck bombing in Amsterdam. U.S. intelligence agencies also credited them for all the other bombings that didn't make it to the news. One of the videos that was being aired on almost every news channel was a scene where ISIS fighters execute several Egyptians. I asked Dustin to analyze the still shot from the videos and he tracked it down to its original upload location in the dark web. The computer lab that produced the video belonged to a Dutch arms dealer who was a longtime associate of Richard. Cynthia's father was behind yet another international crime syndicate, I realized with horror! The terroristic videos were gruesome, but not because they were violent but were well staged.

After a precursory examination, Dustin concluded that a video-editing software was used multiple times in the Dutch man's computer. We traced the video app to its origin and Dustin identified the company that sold the video-editor and discovered that the company stored every single copy of video that is edited by their app through a backdoor channel. I knew it was illegal to store customer data, so I personally visited the CEO of the tech company and persuaded them to show me the uncut videos that were uploaded into their app from the particular Agency server. They agreed to share the original video with me only after I threatened to expose them for violating customer privacy. What I saw in the original video was mind-blowing.

The video was the one ISIS fighters had uploaded for the world audience. It showed a group of men standing in front of an ISIS flag and were slaughtering Egyptian Christian workers and were even attacking women. The terrorist group had purportedly released it to the public, but my research suggested that the Dutchman had circulated it among the intelligence community before releasing it to the public. Dustin compared the publicized video with the uncut one we found on the original computer server and found that the one that was released to the public was actually an edited version. The uncut video showed a bizarre phenomenon. The men in the original video has an uncanny body language. My hacker screened them for identifying marks and noted the tattoo of Texas Rangers on the forearms of the two men in the background. I noticed nearly all of the men on the video had gold wedding bands. Another discerning thing I found was the gold chains around five of the shooter's neck with cross pendants.

Dustin did a quick google search and pointed out to me that one of the basic tenets of the Islamic faith is that tattoos are prohibited by their religion and faithful followers believed that tattooing is a grave sin because it inflicts unnecessary pain on the body and changes the natural form.

I agreed with Dustin that it *was* unlikely that terrorists professing undying conviction in a religion that bans tattoos would be having US Ranger tattoos all over their bodies. Dustin also noted that the gold wedding bands most of the terrorist in the uncut video were wearing also went against the basic tenet of *their* professed faith. Islam strictly prohibits men from wearing gold and silk. I wondered what kind of religious fanatics such as these terrorists could possibly be ignorant in their basic commandments. Finally, in the video, when two of the executioners lean forward, a cross pendant swings from their necks. The man seemed to be wearing the gold chain inside his shirt but his cross pendant and chain slipped out as he fired his rifle. I found this to be curious considering that Moslems, whatever sects they belong to, are unanimous on one aspect- that Jesus is a Prophet of God who was not killed on the cross. They believe an imposter was killed in his place and that Jesus was raised to the fourth heaven and of course will ultimately return to earth and rid the world of all evil. Muslims consider Jesus to be a prophet just like Muhammad, Abraham, Moses or Adam and do not believe that Jesus is any more the son of God than Adam is, since the Koran mentions that Adam too was created without a father or mother. Thus, Muslims abhor wearing the cross because they think wearing a cross is insulting to their revered Prophet Jesus. I knew if those guys in the video were wearing crosses, then they couldn't be Muslim. The question now was *who were they?* And what organization did they work for?

The ISIS execution video had two versions: one that was released to the public and the one we extracted from the video-editing software. In the uncut version, the film continued to roll long after all the prisoners supposedly died. The scene continued to being filmed, as the prisoners in orange jumpsuits jumps up and congratulates each other. Several of the masked executioners pulled off their balaclava masks and exchanged high fives with the men who were pretending to be prisoners. Dustin quickly zoomed in on their faces and within minutes, made positive identification of the unmasked executioners. Facial recognition identified one as a former US Army

Ranger and the other as an ex-con who was arrested twice for illegal arms dealings. According to court records, on one occasion, the man who bailed out the ex-con out of prison was Richard himself.

Dustin continued typing away on his electric keyboard and tried to get positive ID for the remaining perpetrators. A man standing in the background was a former CIA operative who was reported to have died in 2011 in the Kandahar suicide bombing which took the lives of eleven senior Agency senior officers. I looked over his declassified file. Turns out he was in charge of coordinating military airstrikes and was placed on probation for discharging multiple drone strikes over villages in Pakistan and Afghanistan which claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians including children. His file also mentioned that he had a brother who died in a Taliban attack in 2006. Since then, his performances deteriorated and he was removed from active duty for aggressive behavior.

Dustin gave me several addresses to locate them and I tried my best to locate them, but mostly ended up with cold trails. The only active address I was able to zero on was for the ex-convict. I traced him to a resort area in Miami. Upon intensive questioning, he admitted to participating in a short film. He had received an untraceable whitened cash of hundred thousand dollars from an unknown source and received a passport with an alias in his mail the following day. There were instructions on the packet directing him to take a flight to Marrakesh where he met a film crew and participated in several drill shootouts. The crew had to wear jumpsuits and pretend to be killed. McDougal said he really thought it was a stint from a Hollywood movie until he saw an *ISIS* video starring them. After hours of questioning, I could not get any other concrete details from the ex-convict except the money trail through which he received his payment. It had the digital footprint of the Dutchman's other transactions. Dustin also noticed that the exact same logarithm was used to whitewash the cash in Richard's bank accounts when the FBI froze his assets. Richard had previously used that money to plant bombs in a cold war era bunker in order to frame Cynthia's mother. He wanted Cynthia to believe that her mother wanted her dead.

I chased after cold trails until I was exhausted, but when I returned to my apartment, Dustin was wide awake, replaying the scenes from the videos over and over again. He didn't hear me call his name because he was wearing heavy duty headphones.

I tapped him on the head, eliciting a frightened yelp. He whipped around. "You scared me, John."

"What are you doing, still watching the *ISIS* movie?" I slumped on a low couch. "I tracked down all the actors. No one knows anything more than us."

Dustin blinked thoughtfully. "I think I found something. It may be completely irrelevant but I thought you should see this. After you were gone, I put this film through several layers of voice analyzers." Dustin replayed the video and hit pause. "This man here never took off his mask but he is the one yelling profanities in accent-less Arabic and is swearing allegiance to the terrorist group. Here, right before firing his rifle, he shouts god's name pretty loudly. I was able to capture his voice pattern and filter it through US database. I used Military Intelligence resources and found a match in our employee profile.

"Did you get a *positive* identification?" I asked quickly.

"Nearly. You see, I had to be sure so I hired an independent Audio Forensics specialist from the black net. He also confirmed that this Arabic-speaking man is Paul Halebi, a Syrian Christian linguist who worked for the United States military. Although he was an immigrant, he was employed by America military as a translator. Inside sources claimed he was the most trusted US army linguist and he worked as an intelligence expert at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp for five years. But Rear Admiral Delaney who took over as the commander of Camp Echo two years ago had Halebi transferred out of Guantanamo camp after there were rumors that Halebi used extreme violence on Arab detainees. Brig. Gen. John Leubron, a psychiatrist who had worked extensively with detainees in Gitmo, filed three separate complaints against the Syrian linguist. Dr. Leubron reported that Halebi psychologically and sexually tortured the Arab prisoners so much during interrogations, that the detainees were petrified of him and would become disoriented if he entered the interrogation cell. Another officer who had complained about Paul Halebi wrote that Halebi used to cut down water supplies in the detainees' cell so that detainees would be unable to clean themselves for prayer. He seemed to have a personal vendetta against Moslems and used his knowledge of the Sharia law to systematically crush their morale." Dustin displayed a number of graphic pictures he had extracted by hacking into Guantanamo Bay's surveillance cameras. "There is also photographic evidence for this. On that occasion, Halebi splattered blood on a young detainee's face so that he would think himself to be unclean. The prisoner wept hysterically to the point of deliria and had to be sedated. It's all in his army files."

I scribbled down the names Dustin mentioned to me and hurried off to find the next culprit who was behind the *ISIS* video production. It was a long process. I faced numerous obstacles. As I waited in front of the American army linguist's residence, I saw a sedan park parallel to me. The windows rolled down and I saw the muzzle flash of a machine gun. Instinctively, I reversed the car and ducked behind the wheel. The shooter was making a U turn and rammed the back of my car. I swung my vehicle with my strength and hit the assailant from the front. His air bag exploded, trapping him to his seat. I raced to his side of the car and dragged him away before the sedan exploded.

The prisoner I brought in was eager to cooperate. He told me he was being paid generously to kill me. If he didn't do it, someone else will. Dustin went through his financial records. The man received money from an untraceable account which in addition to paying him a few grands, had deposited several million dollars into some social media websites. Although the money trail was crypted and had been rerouted through too many white-washed accounts, Dustin found a base-logarithm identical to Richard's NSA servers connecting all of these transactions. I asked the prisoner why the former director of the NSA was paying social media users. He told me they were not ordinary users but were valuable assets. The dozens of men and women were instrumental in spreading the fear about ISIS and other hoax bombings.

I instructed Dustin to trace the money source. He said the money that was wired into those accounts were easier to follow because it came in monthly installments. I found unspecified amounts of money transferred to at least two dozen Instagram account users who had roughly a million followers each. Dustin pulled one up for me. A vlogger or tweeter based in London received three million dollars last month. She in turn wired random amounts to several Twitter users and YouTube vloggers. I also traced half a million dollar that was sent to a Hollywood movie director. The next month, that director produced a film which showed an Arab terrorist blowing up some church building. At least two television series received funding from this Cayman account in the past six months. Both TV shows covered in detail how the ISIS terrorists were killing Christians and using chemical bombs to destroy hospitals.

It was early 2015. Another ISIS related unrest was brewing in Paris. There had been an attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. The alleged assailants, who were all wearing propylene balaclava masks looked oddly familiar in the security footages. I ran their body language against the attackers of other publicized ISIL execution videos and carefully watched the gunmen gesture as they returned to their car after the attack outside the offices of French weekly newspaper. True enough, there were uncanny similarities. By this time, there media was running exclusive coverages of the terror raid on the Charlie Hebdo office, and unsurprisingly, the mythical ISIS fighters were accused of perpetrating the violence. A handful of men from Middle Eastern background were naturally framed for the attacks and were sent to French jail to stand trial for terrorism.

Richard was back at his game of sowing discord in Europe and spur the region into chaos and catastrophes. His carefully crafted terror network which became popularized as the ISIS rose to notoriety in 2014, when Richard used it to seize large swathes of land in Iraq, Syria and several other cities in the Middle East. Although it appeared as though ISIS was based in the Iraqi city Mosul, I was shocked to see significant money trails leading to known figures in Kremlin. The source of this piece of information came from the US European Command. They published a lengthy report detailing how Russia was the main facilitation hub for the Middle East based terrorist group.

As the son of native Russians, I knew the American reports could not be true. The Russian Federation had no desire to carry out bombings and shootings in Europe and the Middle East. I became desperate to find the truth. Upon interviewing those Russian personalities, I found out that they were being set up to take the fall for all the bombings that was happening under the shallow guise of ISIS. The leader of the group named himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and claimed responsibility for scores of terrorist attack. As the news coverage progressed, Richard managed to carry on launching digital blitzkriegs of extremist propaganda to convince the global media that ISIS was indeed an independent terrorist network funded by Russia. Like the rest of the global intelligence network, I was perplexed by the chain of events and began to delve deeper into the financier who was running the ISIS operation. It did not take me too long to find out who or what was behind the creation of the group.

I tried to comprehend the reason behind Richard's latest attack. What could the man possibly gain by starting a shooting spree in France? For the time being, it seemed he was sticking to original plan of pinning the blame on Moscow so that Western Europe would invade the Russian Federation in order to *stop* the spread of ISIS.

I was getting closer to finding the truth, and since Richard was trying to kill me yet again, I knew I was getting close to unearthing his endgame. I had no doubt that by creating ISIS and framing Russia for its crimes, Richard was trying to achieve some malevolent end. He seemed omnipotent in his capacities.

So far, I managed to gather evidence that proved Richard's involvement with the creation of the terrorist network but I still didn't know who was doing the legwork for him. Two days later, I got my answer. A U.S. general based in an army command center in Baghdad claimed that he had made significant progress against ISIS. I told Dustin to track down every person who met the general in the past three years. We monitored the camera of his Virginia residence. It didn't take too long for us to find Cynthia's stepfather walking in through the general's front door. The image was dated 2010, exactly months prior to the birth of ISIS. I knew if he was hired by Richard to spread propaganda of a fake terrorist organization in Iraq, he must have been paid significant amount of cash. But his bank balance was very low. I then asked Dustin to track down every bank account that was logged in from his home computer. It was a jackpot. An hour after Richard exited from the general's house, he logged into a bank account in the Bank of Reichstein. The account had two hundred and fifty million dollars in it.

Richard made a smart move. He didn't *transfer* money into his pawn's account. That could be traced easily by any government watchdog. Instead, he used a fairly untraceable method of cash delivery. Anyone who agreed to work with him would receive the account and routing number of a prepaid bank account that had generous balance in it. I knew it would be harder to catch Richard red handed in any of the crimes he hired others to do for him. But I couldn't stop trying. I continued to visit the site of the bombing Richard carried out in the name of ISIS and tried to collect evidence from nearby cameras and surveillance footages.

Fortunately, like all criminals, Richard had his weakness. By any means, he was resolved to pin the blame on me or my native motherland. Although I was born in London, Richard knew of my Russian heritage and was aware that I was raised partially in Moscow. By now, he also found out the piece of damning information I had tried to hide from the world: that my biological father was none other than a powerful Politburo member and a Soviet politician who wielded great influence during the fifties and was instrumental in restoring Soviet reforms and glory.

My heart refused to believe that the man who raised me, who I had known to be my father, was in reality a stranger in my life; a man who married my mother in order to spare her life from the embarrassment of having a child without a husband, and that he did not actually sire me. It was a painful thing to see the facts you knew to be steadfast shatter into pieces. I knew the man who dominated my childhood and controlled every aspect of my life with an iron fist was my father. My mother's letters to her family and pages of her diary said otherwise. She stipulated in those worn papers that I had come to this world from the result of a different union; one between her and a Soviet party member.

I gradually learned more about my biological family from distant relatives and their memoirs. Although the man my mother claimed to be my real father was often criticized by the Western powers for being Communist, many researchers credited him with reforming the nation after the death of Joseph Stalin. I once spoke to a professor of Moscow University who had personally known my father. He told me that although Stalin and my father were close comrades, they soon parted ways.

The man my mother claimed was my biological father was exiled to Kazakhstan later in his life, and was forced to abandon politics, and I found out many years later that had become the manager of the industrial plant, and was a member of the Russian Orthodox church. Upon becoming the Communist Party Leader after the death of Stalin, he began massive programs for political reform, including investing in agriculture.

When Cynthia's stepfather found out about my family history, his attacks on me were not directed to hurt me alone. He realized that Russia played a more vital role in my life than I admitted. So, in his subsequent sabotage operations, Richard started to frame Russia for it. When he funded the group ISIS, he worked painstakingly to ensure that Russian agents would be held responsible for the carnage that would take place in Iraq and Syria under the name of this group. It was not overtly difficult for him to pull off the frame job because senior officials at the Agency and the Bureau were predisposed to believe in rumors which concerned Russia. It was a part of their conceptualization of the Russian Federation.

After weeks of cautious investigation, Dustin was able to decipher several dark web chat-rooms which Richard used to recruit hired mercenaries in Asia and the Middle East. From the messages we intercepted, it appeared as though the new terrorist cell that Richard created was chiefly to discredit Russian sovereignty. He had manufactured artificial money trails so that the IMF and other financial watchdogs would believe that it was the Russian Federation that had financed the terror network. Interpol received anonymous reports that showed Russian Direct Investment Fund to be complicit in the ISIS attacks. More than fifteen news agencies began to air news that blamed the RDIF of funding terrorism.

I worked day and night to dispel such false notion because I knew the news and reports were fake and doctored. Dustin ran meticulous checks on the Investment Fund and concluded that Russia's sovereign wealth fund that had a reserved capital of seventy billion dollars was certainly not responsible for any of the attacks on Europe and Asia. I managed to persuade a handful of news media to desist from airing such false propaganda about Russia and continued collecting evidence that the Federation was innocent. However, it was not an easy task.

Despite presenting sound evidence that ISIS was a mercenary group that was funded by former NSA rogue operatives, the State Department officials I met with seemed eager to buy Richard's narrative. I couldn't understand why they were insistent on believing that the Russian government was funding all of the ISIS attacks to destabilize the Middle East. The individuals in the CIA's leadership seemed to have found a niche in the counterterrorism industry to market xenophobia and problematize Russians as a group- under the rubric of protecting the United States. It mattered little whether there was evidence supporting their claims. To them, Russia was guilty as charged.

Russia had no motive, I tried to explain in vain.

Yet, the paranoia persisted and the senior CIA officers and the American military leaders who spoke with me brushed off my concerns and declared that Russia must have created ISIS to create discord among America's oil-rich allies in the Gulf. The Commander

of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, a joint US-Canadian operation that monitored the skies over North America for missile and airborne threats, went as far as to announce that he would move his strike teams from their command center at Fredrickson Air Force Base in Colorado to a number of target locations around Moscow. This suggestion made my blood run cold.

I tried in vain to shut down Richard's operation but it was too abstract and dichotomous an enterprise for me to control. He operated via international call centers and used numerous shell companies to cover his tracks.

This group operated with surgical precision. Despite monitoring global chatter, I could not predict the next place Richard was going to strike. Mass shooting at the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli, Curtis Culwell Center in Texas, Thalys train in Paris and a Tunisian National Museum. Bombings of a Russian airline operated Metrojet, bombings and shooting in Ankara, Beirut, Syria, Egypt and Iraq and a shopping mall in Jakarta. A bombing at the music festival in Ansbach, Germany and then there were attacks close to home. The Ohio State University attacks as well as the attempted attack on New York's Port Authority Bus terminals. The list was endless. By now I had a rough idea of how Richard was operating. I knew his next target would be inside the United States because he wanted to show Americans that Russians wanted to disrupt their nation, so the infuriated patriots would respond with air attacks. This time, I guessed the location of his attack before he struck. It was at a theater.

I showed up early that day and spotted three suspected terrorists who were preparing to shoot people in execution style. Two of the men I captured were former NSA operatives who now worked in Richard's black ops program. However, I was unable to neutralize the threat entirely but managed to defuse two mega bombs that were rigged beneath the dance floor. Clearly, Richard had a backup plan and he sent in a fourth shooter to wreak havoc at the nightclub.

I knew what he was trying to do- by framing the Russian government of carrying out acts of terrorism worldwide, he hoped to turn the world against them. If his plan worked, the results would have been catastrophic. Despite having reasonable defense capacities, Russia would not have stood a chance against the entire NATO force.

I knew the world *had* to believe that Russians were not behind the attacks, so I sent an urgent appeal to the State Duma deputies who were acquainted to me and entreated them to engage in active combat in places where Richard had built his terrorists cells. Most of his activities were concentrated in Iraq and Syria so I convinced the politicians to send Russian troops to Syria so that the NATO nations could see for themselves that Russia was not the culprit. Would they have sent ground troops to Syria to halt the growth of ISIS if they had been behind it? My reasonings proved useful and Kremlin obliged. Eventually, Russian forces moved in to Syria and formed a hegemony with local military forces and civilian parties in order to defeat the mercenary group Richard had created there.

November, 2014

The American news media was constantly printing and airing stories about several suspected Russian spies. When I read the newspaper one morning, I knew the news sounded suspicious. The FBI announced that it was running investigation into the attempted assassination of three American senators and the governor of Wyoming. It was such a bizarre thing to happen, especially because the alleged attackers were five Russian nationals, who were accused of using political groups to gain access to those American politicians.

One of the Russian suspects was arrested and given a jail sentence while the rest were absconding. Only one of the alleged attackers admitted to trying to kill the U.S. Senator. I was confused as to why this story was being famous. I decided to investigate the issue, and my dear friend Dustin hacked into the secure cellular communication lines of the Russian spies who were arrested by the FBI. My hacker friend later found out that one of Richard's closest friend was in constant contact with the three Russian woman who were accused of the killing attack. I knew the man. His name was Fabian and was in the habit of conducting business with Russian oligarchs. He also had a valid banking system in Russia.

Dustin found out that Fabian used money from Russian bank accounts to pay the Russian nationals in America and then kidnapped their children and threatened them to carry out the attack on the American senators. Fabian wanted the FBI to trace the money, and believe that Russian was ordering those assassinations. But it was a very complicated framing job, which we discovered when we downloaded the phone conversation and I read the transcript. It was a very threatening and chilling message. Only one young Russian tourist who was in New York agreed to shoot the senator, because her parents were kidnapped by Richard's henchmen, but the other two Russian nationals refused to assassinate anyone and escaped. It was suspicious because the Russian citizens who were framed were living a civilian life in America, but Richard was able to frame them in a way that made the FBI believe they were real spies working for the SVR. One of them admitted to the FBI of being a SVR agent after one of her daughters were killed by Fabian. In order to convince the U.S. government that the Russian citizens were being ordered to carry out the killings on the instructions from Moscow, Fabian pretended to be Russian and spoke in native language and told them to assassinate American senators who were lobbying in Congress

for Ukraine, and were vocal speakers against Russia. One of my contacts at the FBI said they were able to arrest the Russian female assassin because hours before she came to kill the senator, they received an anonymous tip from a man who said a Russian assassin would come to kill the senator, so as soon as the Russian woman arrived, the FBI took her in custody.

In her prison, the woman admitted that a Russian man ordered her to kill the senator. I understood why she would think Fabian was Russian because he carefully planned the whole thing to make it look as though Moscow was sending hitmen to kill American politicians. In reality, the person who was telling her this was not Russian at all. He was American, working for Richard. But he was skilled and he was framing Russians, so each time he contacted the Russian tourist, he was acting Russian so that Russia gets the blame for the assassination of the American senator.

Only after many years of living in the United States and slaving to the wishes of Richard and serving his covert NSA division faithfully did I reluctantly admit to myself that the greatest tragedy of the 21st century was the collapse of the Soviet Union. The day the Iron Curtain crumbled, and the unified eastern bloc broke away, the KGB had little power remaining, and the Russian government became vulnerable, especially to the manipulative doctrines of the black ops NSA program. Ever since the year 1991, Russia no longer had the authority or the unflinching capacity to prevent the bloody conflicts that pervaded the Euro-Asian continent. Within one year, the invasion of Kuwait was underway, marking the beginning the first Persian Gulf War. My former commanders at the Camp were no longer acting in professional capacity, and neither did they have the resources to put an end to the deadly conflict. It was the beginning of many unnecessary wars, which in turn led to greater conflicts. The Rwandan genocide and the Serbian-Bosnian conflicts were just one of many disasters that the world had to witness, and the once energetic Russian government and its clandestine espionage departments which always sent skilled operatives to remove belligerent players from the picture and maintain global peace, was no longer functioning. American spy agencies were controlled chiefly by Richard and his trusted advisors, one of whom was an Italian man who had powerful connections in the upper echelons of the Sicilian mafia. Together, they managed to buy the supports of scores of US Senators and Congressmen, who in turn approved fundings for unsanctioned battles and unjustified wars. For my part, I was as guilty as Richard, for I believed in his goodness, and thought his missions were justified and his actions benevolent. Countess times, I rushed to the remotest places in Africa, Europe or South America under his personal directions, and retrieved millions of dollars and gold bars from his enemies. I sincerely thought Richard was using those money and weapons to ensure world peace and organizing international charity events. He once begged me to steal a rare and ancient statue from a state building in Belgium. He showed me the pictures of the location, and the sculpture. It was an unimpressive sight, that displayed a naked young woman breastfeeding an old man. Richard told me that there was no possible way he could legally obtain the item as it was protected as national heritage item, but since it contained a valuable document that would save millions of lives, I had to bring it for him. As usual, I readily gave my consent to take any risk and do his bidding. I went there the next week and retrieved the statue on top of the annex of the Belfry of Ghent in Antwerp, Belgium. When I first saw the statue, I was flabbergasted by its rather unpleasant depiction of human bodies. The stone statue showed a young woman breastfeeding her elderly father. I felt guilty for deceiving the authorities in Belgium, but I knew if Richard had wanted it so badly, there must have been a very good reason for it. So brought it back for Richard, who thanked me profusely. But I was nearly killed in that mission. Stealing a national heritage was a grave crime in Belgium, so I was chased by cops. Was shot twice and hid in a sewer for one whole day to avoid arrest. For one week, I hid inside filthy alleyways, and had no food or medicine. I hid the statue under an old bridge, but nearly starved to death while avoiding the police. I then had to live in the streets for the entire week, and finally found a packet of pasta noodles someone had discarded in the garbage can. I had nowhere else to go and cook the stale and hard noodles, so I collected enough water in a bowl, and waited until midday, hoping the sun would warm the liquid. Then I soaked a few strands of the noodles in the water for the entire day, until it became edible. I saved every morsel so that the stale packet of dry pasta noodles would last for a week. Poverty was painful, but what made me feel worse than hunger was the angry and often disgusting looks Belgian pedestrians tossed in my way, and some sneered and spat on me as they rushed by. I shut my eyes and tried to pretend this was all a bad dream. I wished those people would understand that they are only seeing me for a small snapshot of my life, and had no way to know what I have been going through. They did not know I was in their country to do an important task for Richard. I had to get the precious statue back to him, for he said it contained something valuable. But after living like a homeless man in the foreign land, and shivering in the unfriendly roads, it seemed easier to give up and die, but somehow, I did not want to give up just yet. I did not want to leave Cynthia behind and travel to an unknown and unfamiliar land of death. I also did not want to fail Richard.

I had suffered in that mission, but I thought at least I saved some lives, but later, I saw Richard used the statue to adorn the front lawn of his mansion. I questioned him once about what was so valuable about the statue which he asked me to get for him, he replied vaguely, saying that he had been mistaken, and that the aesthetic value of the two semi-naked man and woman was priceless. He explained that he wanted to keep it at the entrance of his mansion. I forgot this incident soon after.

Millions continued to die in the years that followed, and it only got worse. The second Iraq war, the civil war in Chechnya, the bloodshed in Afghanistan, the bombing of Sudan and Somalia, the massacres in Chad and Congo, the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, the Yemeni conflicts, the battles in Dagestan, the endless destruction in the Middle East and the mass murders in the Horn of Africa.

Oftentimes, I sat in bereavement and mourned the state of the world. The unending wars, the ceaseless famines, the sectarian battles all began after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I often wished the country had remained united and powerful, so that people like Richard could not dismantle the governments of each small country, and one by one, take over the leadership and use those paid politicians to be proxies and launch strikes and unnecessary invasion against one another.

My torment did not cease. I was arrested more times than I could bear and tortured by American guards.

I did not know who my kidnappers were, except that they were all Americans. They looked professional, and were trained like genuine CIA or NSA operatives. I assumed they belonged to some sort of law enforcement agency, so I demanded to speak with an attorney, but one of the interrogators laughed and said I was not a U.S. citizen and therefore had no rights. They insisted that they could make me disappear into a dark pit somewhere in the tropical forests in Asia and no one would question them.

Thou Art Just...

Thine image, no mortal can foresee,
Nor is there any partner in Thy sovereignty,
But the imminence of Thy existence is to be,
A phantom being existent in immortality.

I have no more reason to persevere,
All my cheerless days are forgotten,
All my crushed dreams are obscure,
Since I was but a child - misbegotten.

There is not an atom of which Thou art unaware,
Nor a soul whom Thou had not seen,
My flaws have not escaped Thine notice,
Thou had known what I would have been.

Let Thy remembrance permeate my soul,
And the light of my vision to come from Thee,
Remit my incompetence if I should ever fail,
Thou art the kindest of what kindness should be.

My kindred suffered for the sins of mine,
Crushed beneath the cruelest blows,
Red flows the river beside the ravine,
Beneath which the brave hearts lie.

Oh, what was the guilt of my race?
For which crimes did my people die?
For what sin did they suffer this disgrace -
To be uprooted from the birth place?

Why did my nation pay the price
Of a blind, avenging transgressor?
Oh, why were their cries
Silenced and buried forever!

Man may forget, but this grief will not,

And pain lives on without wear or tear,
And of Thy creation, living or dead,
Thine is the haven to solicit prayer.

For a few minutes, the American guards were cordial, and even offered me a can of coca cola. Then they asked me to sign a written confession, stating that I was an assassin sent by the Soviet leader to kill the American president and his entire family. This was utterly false and outrageous. I did not know why they wanted me to sign the false confession, but it was likely because I was a Russian national living in America. However, I consistently refused to sign anything, and denied being an assassin. That was when one of the Americans said he would administer special aquapuncture on me. I had no idea what aquapuncture treatment was, but soon the torturers began their worst game. For days, they hammered tiny metal nails inside my fingers, and pierced me constantly with thick needles, and stuck those long pieces under my fingernails. I lamented bitterly, and shed floods of tears but my captors had hearts of stone and nothing made them show any pity to a young boy like me. My distress was indescribable because it was not the physical pain that hurt me so terribly but it was the utter mistreatment, where for the six months I was locked in there, the only name they addressed me as was swine. The guards and interrogators only called me pig, and when I could not tolerate their torture and insults any longer, I tried to end my life by refusing food. More than five times, I tried to stop intake of food in order to die, and they kept forcing me to eat, treating me like a subhuman. When I skipped meal for the first time, angry guards grabbed my arm, and stuffed plates of food into my mouth until I choked. My fortitude gave way again, and the tiny jail room was blotted out by my rushing tears. They did not treat me like a human being at all, and eventually I believed I was a subhuman creature, forced to stay alive for the entertainment of these American guards. I believed I was worse than an animal. Each day, they would repeat their needle torture of inserting long needles in my neck and face. When I cried in pain, the guards said people pay for this kind of treatment. For months, they used aquapuncture torture to prick holes into each nerve of my body. If I could describe even half of what suffering I had gone through, then I would be able to convey my emotions. But I never could find the words to describe my torment and was constantly breaking into passionate tears. After handing me a plate of food, one of the men left behind the rusty cover of a tinned can of beans, and I clutched the thin aluminum sheet to my dear heart, silently grateful that I would be saved. As soon as the guards were out of sight, I immediately carved the metallic strip rigorously, and sharpened it discreetly. I was able to create deep cuts on my wrists. Minutes later, the flow of blood became intensified and slowly, I faded away into a blissful sleep, knowing that in a few hours, I would be very much dead, and no one could ever harm me again. But one of the guards who brought in food noticed my arms, and realized I slit my wrists in an attempt to die. He wrapped a gauze around my fingers, and screamed so loudly that I was jolted awake. Uttering the vilest expletives and curses, he dragged me to an adjoining room where another guard roughly stitched the veins of my wrist. They spat on my face and said I would never be allowed to die, and must continue to live like a pig and suffer like a slave. I am sure there is someone in the world who suffered more than I had, but I believe I faced hardships so unceasingly that surviving was doubly difficult, for I was only nineteen, young and alone, and I had no one, and in those moments of agony, I felt very helpless.

April, 2015

My old friend Sam contacted me and sought my assistance in solving a series of coordinated attacks that the Interpol had expected to take place. He asked me to join him and the Agency's liaison to Interpol, Hadrien Mulroney, in his country residence.

I had spoken and corresponded with Hadrien numerous times in the past year, but our physical paths crossed only once when I was preventing an illegal weapons shipment from entering the U.S-Canada border. The soft-spoken Interpol agent was also the director of Canada's Border Services Agency and a leading analyst on the Canadian Counterterrorism Threat Analysis center.

Although I had heard highly of Hadrien Mulroney, I was unsure of whether I should take him into my confidence and inform him of what I discovered, but Sam brushed aside my concerns and assured me that Hadrien was an old friend of his and could be unquestionably trusted.

Sam Clark had been one of the few people in the world who knew Richard as well as I did because we both worked for League 13, the black op division of the NSA which Richard had created after going rogue.

After introducing himself, Hadrien proceeded to summarize the main issues Interpol and the Canadian Counterterrorism Threat Analysis center had been investigating. He gave a brief overview of a recent event in Europe where several satirical magazines came

under heavy criticism for publishing offensive cartoons of religious and political figures. The Canadian officer suggested that Richard was likely behind the publication of cartoon. Upon hearing this, the CIA officer got to his feet and interrupted.

“What is it about him and cartoon?” Sam Clark blurted out. “Does Richard enjoy drawing or what?”

The Interpol investigator steepled his fingers before replying. “I believe he felt this would be the ideal motive. I recall the email we intercepted with the editor of the French satirical magazine. He had corresponded with Richard several times in order to receive proper instructions. Richard had directed him to reprint the offensive cartoons as many times as he could regardless of the unrest or protests in neighboring cities or countries. The magazine editor was offered five million dollars per week, for this one job. Additionally, Richard assured them he would provide private security for them and hoped that some unrest would occur so that he could use the movement to camouflage his activities and overthrow or replace the current French government.”

“He could’ve hired any newspaper or magazine in Europe to print offensive cartoon and start a civil war.” I told the Canadian investigator. “Why choose France?”

Sam answered. “I think it is because he knows they are gullible. He had experience in the past dealing with sentimental Frenchmen. They are simple minded emotional people who are easy to mislead. I mean, think about it- how many Frenchmen are actually aware that an Austrian man paid the satirical magazine owner to print the caricatures of some religious figures? They have no idea Richard is using them like a puppet and pulling their strings.”

“He’s done this before.” Hadrien Mulroney stated calmly. “When he dismantled Blacksand and was looking for untraceable cash to build another terrorist organization, he decided to steal the money from the Libyan leader, and somehow managed to convince NATO countries that Gaddafi was a threat. It was in 2011.”

“You mean the March attacks?”

Hadrien nodded. “As soon as the NATO-led coalition began a military intervention in Libya, French planes attacked pro-Gaddafi forces in the Benghazi and enabled Blacksand operatives to capture Gaddafi and torture the information of all his bank accounts out of him. On the urging of Richard, French jets launched air strikes against Libyan Army tanks and vehicles and gave Richard’s men enough time to escape. He then used the Libyan dictator’s money to create the notorious ISIS and carried out hundreds of small-scale attacks blaming it on the fictional terrorist organization.”

“Which attacks are you talking about, Hadrien?” I inquired.

The Canadian intelligence officer looked at me with half-closed eyes. “Blacksand operatives threatened a French-Algerian man to claim responsibility for attempting to blow up a church near Paris. The last time he attacked locations in Paris, he made sure the media received a falsified version of the events, and French media, being naïve as they are, bought his narrative and even world leaders joined in the chorus and believed that ISIS extremists or terrorists were behind those attacks. He knows the French have a weakness- they get hurt easily and feel pained whenever a terror attack takes place.”

“Interpol knew all this and didn’t take any decisive action?” Sam said incredulously.

Hadrien Mulroney pursed his lips. “Interpol foiled the actual church attack and discovered that approximately a hundred other churches were scheduled to be bombed on that very day. We tracked the source of the order coming from a warehouse half kilometer from the Church of Saint-Éloi, which is a Roman Catholic church in Dunkirk.”

I asked. “What did Interpol find?”

“Detailed plans of terrorist attacks, but what astounded us was the hostages that were being held there.”

“Hostages?”

“Yes, the port area was heavily guarded and around twenty men of Middle Eastern and North African origin were locked inside a shipping container,” the Canadian Counterterrorism Threat Analyst informed us. “They were being prepped by a team of well-armed mercenaries- mostly Eastern European former military men, but several of the team leaders were Americans. We later discovered they had been Blacksand private military contractors. But you’ll never guess what they were planning. When we got there and secured the area after a huge firefight, we saw that it was a terrorist breeding ground in the purest sense. The Middle Eastern youths were told to strap bomb on their bodies and blow up at strategic spots in French cities. All of them were equipped with high frequency ear comm by which the mercenaries communicated with them and could remotely detonate the C4 explosives.”

“I don’t believe that,” Sam declared. “No matter how much duress someone is under, they wouldn’t agree to blow themselves up.”

“No,” Hadrien agreed, “but they would if their loved ones were threatened. We rescued a young boy of North African descent who was gripping a machine gun to his chest and was refusing to surrender. He spoke very little French and it was very difficult to calm him down, but I eventually convinced him to trust me. When I asked him why he was holding the gun, he said he *had* to kill at least one hundred Frenchmen within this evening. He told me a bizarre story, and after I corroborated it with Syrian and Turkish authorities, I knew he was telling me the truth.”

“What did the terrorist say to you?”

“I ordered the Interpol tactical unit to evacuate the boy from the premises and after couple of hours, he was thoroughly debriefed and gave us a full account of what kind of mobius dilemma he was facing. He told the Interpol special agents all about how his sister was kidnapped by an unknown team of men and that she was being held by human traffickers. The Arab speaking boy was told if he didn’t play along with the false narrative and take responsibility for the shooting of hundreds of French civilians, then his mother would be killed and his sister would be sold into ISIS’s sex slave markets. As unusual as it was, a two-man team from Interpol’s counterintelligence division went to the Turkish-Syrian border and located his eleven-year-old sister. The Interpol team found the boy’s sister in a secure compound. Things got interesting at that point. The girl was being guarded by several Canadian spec ops who were under the impression that the prison they were guarding was a valuable CIA asset. The elite special operations unit members had no idea they were being played by Richard and his corrupt organization, but when they found out, they agreed to turn against their employer. That is how we gathered enough evidence to prove that the shooters were not really terrorists but were being coerced into carrying out massive acts of violence.”

Sam was scowling furiously. “So, the men who shot up five civilians in a Paris supermarket- you are saying they were forced to become assassins?”

“More like coerced into committing acts of terror.” Hadrien Mulroney heaved his shoulders. “Really, it was nerve wracking, even for me. Those men of Middle Eastern origins were ordinary citizens- grocers, farmers and mechanics- and they were blackmailed into carrying out acts of terror or make videos claiming responsibility for whatever they wrote in the film scripts. I interrogated one of the Blacksand mercenaries who was personally prepping the hostages. He admitted that the earpiece on the Arab men were placed to ensure they did not stray from their instructions, because those civilians were hesitant to take the lives of fellow Frenchmen. And the one instruction every one of the shooters or bombers had to adhere to was to say chant certain words, like Alla, Mohamet, or Akber, before spray shooting an area. If they didn’t shout those Arabic words, their loved ones would have been killed.”

“Why was Blacksand targeting France so desperately?” I inquired.

The Canadian man squinted his eyes. “My guess is Richard wants to spur a civil war in the country and dismantle the legitimate government and replace it with a puppet one that he can control.”

“What makes me angry is how he constantly uses France to benefit his causes.” Sam Clark fumed. “Like he did back in 2011, making French air force bombard Libya, killing hundreds of civilians all because he wanted to capture and interrogate Gaddafi and seize the dictator’s wealth.”

The Canadian Counterterrorism Threat Analyst looked at Sam. “All of Gaddafi’s two hundred billion was unaccounted for, correct?”

Sam nodded. “CIA’s economic analysts concluded that his money was gone. They couldn’t tell where it went but wherever Richard stashed it, it was not traceable.”

“Lucky him, stealing money from the Libyan dictator and creating a powerful terrorist organization behind which he could effectively hide all of Blacksand’s discretions and destabilize Middle East completely.”

“With all that money, it is no wonder he has been able to hire so many dedicated soldiers to serve him.” I muttered under my breath. “Do either of you know what Richard is planning next?”

“According to a manual we recovered from the port in Dunkirk, Blacksand operatives were scheduled to target Vienna. It was number two on their list.”

“What was number one?” I said.

“Nice, Paris and Lyon.”

“I can see why he targeted France. He enjoys playing with people’s emotions. But why attack his own country? Richard is originally from Austria.”

“Maybe it is precisely *because* he is from there.” Hadrien explained. “Richard has a strong influence over organized criminal groups in Vienna. It is likely he set his goons in motion there as we speak.”

“Speaking of the devil,” Sam interrupted. “I received an alert on my Agency email. Numerous gunmen were seen running around the main streets of Vienna early this morning. Police reported armed assailants in balaclava masks raced through public squares and shot at random people.”

“I was right,” Hadrien said. “Your Richard already put his Blacksand contractors at work.”

“We’ll know for sure if they are Blacksand operatives if they follow the typical terrorist protocol. According to the men we captured, the men doing the shootings are instructed to shout *Alla*, or *Mohamet* before discharging their weapons.” Sam Clark said before

switching on the news report. He increased the volume and nodded. "It's an affirmative. The assailants have been shot, but Austrian police confirmed that the men shouted *Alla* before shooting. And a similar shooting took place in Salzburg the day before."

"This is interesting," Hadrien commented. "Have you read the police profile of the alleged assailant? They claim to have found a laptop in his possession that contained numerous emails and messages that announced he has a dying desire to join the ISIS group."

Sam sighed. "How ironic! The shooter wanted to join the terrorist organization funded by Richard himself. And he was carrying his incriminating laptop in his back pocket while shooting away. Great."

Hadrien Mulroney looked distracted. He had received an update on his phone and frowned. "It is Germany. My colleagues in Europol just sent me the latest news from their Berlin office."

"Any notable updates?" I asked.

"Just some more details into the false-flag attacks in Bavaria," Hadrien told me. "BND looked into this case after Berlin police stumbled across some evidence- by sheer luck. They unwittingly unearthed a clandestine terrorist organization we now know was funded by Richard. Blacksand operatives supplied the group with weapons and gave them detailed blueprints to attack government buildings and assassinate specific government officials."

"How did they find about them so easily?" I asked. "Richard knows how to hide his tracks."

Hadrien Mulroney took a deep breath. "Last month, a German Bundeswehr lieutenant was arrested by Berlin police who charged him with fraud."

"What kind of fraud?" I pressed.

"The officer was carrying false identity papers. Fake ID, license, and an entire phony profile. Police thought it was an ordinary identity theft until they studied the name he was using. It was an Arabic name."

"Why?"

"The Bundeswehr lieutenant had registered as a Syrian refugee under a false name and claimed asylum in Bavaria. His application was approved and he was allotted living quarters at a refugee shelter and even received government benefits. He later used his identity card to purchase weapon, plastic explosives and ISIS banners, making sure it was traced to his name."

"How is it possible for a German man to pose as a Syrian refugee? He was bound to get noticed by other refugees." Sam reasoned.

"That is a good point. Interpol questioned him briefly. The lieutenant said he didn't know Arabic at all but spoke French and posed as a French-speaking Syrian immigrant. The cover was flawless, so within a week of settling into his refugee housing, he proceeded to buy weapons."

"Who was he targeting?" Sam Clark inquired.

"The man admitted to planning a subtle attack. He aimed to kill three anti-immigrant politicians, so that it would appear as though refugees who are coming into Germany were carrying out these terrorist attacks. He also insisted he was acting alone but we know it was not a lone wolf operation."

"How are you so certain?"

"We identified his partners. Two soldiers from *Jagerbataillon* 131 were scheduled to lead a kill team into the arrival terminal of Berlin-Tegel Airport, where a twelve-person international ecumenical delegation, comprised of representatives of the World Council of Churches including the Lutheran Church in Finland was scheduled to arrive. The hit team would have gunned them down as soon as they left the baggage area. The assassins were carrying false identity papers and planned to disguise the murder as an act committed by Syrian refugees."

"They couldn't have created a false identity of a Syrian refugee by themselves." I remarked.

"I agree," Hadrien said. "The identity was meant to be a fool-proof coverup, that would allow them to murder elected officials and make authorities believe that some random Arab refugee did it. And I've inspected the forged documents myself. They were mailed to the Bundeswehr lieutenant from an American address. Of course, by the time we shared our knowledge with the Department of Homeland Security, the place was deserted. Whoever used it was gone."

"What did the German police conclude?"

"Federal Police spokesman told us he believed the arrestees were hoping to carry out the murders in such a way that it would appear to have been done by a radical Islamist terrorist. Which is odd considering they belonged to far-right parties, and in addition to possessing illegal weapons, had large caches of Nazi memorabilia in their homes."

I posed the question to no one in particular. "Why didn't the German military begin this investigation sooner?"

"Truth is, it has been ongoing, and they had around hundred suspects under constant surveillance. This arrest came as a surprise to me," Hadrien remarked. "The Interpol hoped to track down all the members before apprehending the lead suspects."

"Why didn't the military wait then?" Sam demanded.

The Canadian intelligence officer chewed his lips before offering a reply. "My friend is a Bundeswehr colonel. He says the men were moving in for an attack on several government building in Berlin and Munich, so they had to apprehend them. What triggered the alarm was the discovery that thirty thousand ammunition rounds have vanished from German military arsenals since last year."

I asked. "Do we know who took them?"

"Interpol didn't have solid leads, but so far it looks like the far-right underground faction has taken control of the army's elite commando unit. North Rhine-Westphalia police claimed right-wing extremists had been behind the heist." Hadrien chose his words carefully. "I had no doubt Richard was funding them. According to a memo we recovered from a suspected terrorist, they were taught to fight unto death for their cause."

"Which is?"

"To cleanse Germany of all immigrant population and restore Nazi glory. But there was a catch. All attacks perpetrated on elected officials and law enforcement agencies had to be camouflaged to appear as though it was perpetrated by the immigrants of ISIS."

"Richard wants to start a civil war, destabilize the government." Sam said irritably.

I interrupted. "How is he recruiting all these men?"

"I might be able to help you with that," Hadrien offered. "The cyber defense task force of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution discovered an extremist chatline the right-wing zealots use. Somehow it managed to stay unnoticed for years."

"What else did the BfV find?" The CIA officer wanted to know.

"They are working in sync with the BKA, I mean the Federal Criminal Police Office, and found out that eight German companies based in China were funding this terrorist cell. And just in case you want to guess the corporation that provides security for those German companies? Blacksand."

When we didn't comment, Hadrien continued.

"This week, the German army's counterintelligence wing arrested a 37-year-old sergeant major after recovering a sizeable stockpile of ammunition and TNT in his residence. German detectives believe the man had been preparing for an assault on the Saxon Landtag."

"Excuse me?" Sam said, confused.

Hadrien quickly elaborated. "It is a government building that serves as the seat of the state parliament of Saxony. The military is presently conducting mass inquiry into suspected far-right underground movement in its ranks. German police also arrested a non-commissioned officer from Germany's elite KSK army unit last Tuesday after he was seen openly glorifying their Nazi past. He had a huge stash of military-issue firearms and ammunitions in his possession."

"How did you learn all this, Hadrien?" Sam Clark asked.

"From my contact in the German military," Hadrien said simply. "The Bundeswehr colonel said the army is investigating far-right underground movement withing the ranks of the KSK, an elite commando force similar to the British SAS or the American Green Berets."

Sam sighed exasperatedly. "I don't understand how Richard spread his tentacles into Germany's most secretive Special Operations units."

"Eight men were arrested in southwestern Germany. The arrestees, who professed allegiance to far-right ideologies, included two soldiers and a military intelligence officer. They were hired by an unnamed source who paid them seven million euros to carry out a series of false-flag terrorist attack against high-ranking anti-refugee politicians and blame it on asylum seekers."

"Wait, why would racist soldiers agree to assassinate politicians who support their anti-immigrant views?"

"I am glad you asked that. We put the same question to the detainees. They admitted that in order to stage the perfect false flag attack, their employer suggested they attack and kill German politicians who did not support the government's refugee policies. That was the only way the media and public would be convinced that Arab refugees actually carried out the attacks. Another man, a university student in Berlin, was arrested after BND officers suspected him of planning a severe act of violence against the state out of a right-wing extremist conviction. Like the other men, he was also scheduled to pose as an Arab or Turkish immigrant."

Sam Clark was clenching and unclenching his fists. "I was hoping Richard wasn't behind that too, but I was wrong again. Why doesn't that bastard ever stop? First, he detonates bombs in France, then he hires thugs to run around the streets in Vienna and shoot bystanders and now he is funding a proper coup in Germany. This is madness."

I could tell my friend was angry so I tried to calm him. "Look, Sam, Richard is not the only evil man in the world. I am sure there are people worse than him around. If they had as much power or money as Richard has, then who knows what they would have done?"

My friend looked unconvinced.

Hadrien placed a pacifying hand on Sam's shoulder. "You are not entirely mistaken to be wary of Richard. I have read only partial report of the investigation. One of the leaders of the far-right neo-Nazi terrorist cell made a plea deal with the German prosecutor and in exchange for reduced sentencing, he gave us the location of his safehouse in Bremen, northern Germany."

"You guys found something there?" Sam said.

"Lots of maps, plots, sketches and several documents detailing Richard's plan for Europe. We were not wrong to assume he had decided to overthrow most of the legitimate governments in Europe and replace it with men he groomed with his own ideology."

"What is his endgame?" I asked.

The Canadian Counterterrorism Threat Analyst blinked slowly. "According to the Bundeswehr officer we arrested, they had only one job; to create uproar in the German society by carrying out rampant assassinations, bombings and beheadings and frame immigrants, Arabs or Syrian refugees for it. The endgame is to set a modern-day holocaust in motion. He wants to put all Middle Eastern men and women in camps or prisons, detain all refugees indefinitely, and control the government. And if we are right about Richard's obsession with ISIS and making it seem as though Russia funded the terrorist organization; I would not be too surprised if he really wishes to remake the second world war. The Nazis certainly followed these steps- first, small acts of violence against the Jews of Europe, then deporting some, then exterminating all Jews, then they took over one neighboring country at a time before uniting all of Europe and invading Russia."

Sam frowned. "Did the terrorist know which countries are being targeted next?"

"We did better," Hadrien said. "According to the wire transfers they received, we were able to predict Richard's next move. In went in circles, really. First, it was France and Austria, but the pattern proved that Germany and Spain were next on the list. And lastly, Blacksand operatives intend to take over Poland and Italy. I don't think they'll want to make an enemy out of London just yet, but there were email communication that we intercepted which called for nuclear strikes against England and France, and framing those attacks on either Turkey or the Russian Federation. So, the alert level on these countries are still at a critical level."

"Are you all right?" Hadrien was speaking softly.

Then I heard Sam's voice. "You okay, man?"

My head rolled on my shoulders as I tried to make out the words my friend was saying, but there was a strange ringing in my ears. I felt terribly sick. It was nauseating to think that Europe would once again break into war and bloodshed. I shuddered to think what would become of Russia- would it suffer again? How can one live a normal life when there are such dangers looming ahead?

I received an urgent message from a former associate from the Camp. We had saved each other's lives numerous times while conducting joint missions in the former Soviet Union. My friend who was now working in the Main Directorate happened to be the Russian military attaché to Yugoslavia. He said Russia was being falsely accused of plotting a coup right before the 2016 parliamentary vote in Montenegro, but he discovered, with the assistance of cyberunit 27562 of the G.U. that it was a frame job. Moscow was being falsely accused of meddling in a foreign country's election. My friend assured me that Russian intelligence officers had no reason to topple the pro-NATO government that was in place in Montenegro.

I wanted to know on what ground are NATO accusing the Russian spy agencies of orchestrating the Montenegro coup. My friend assured me that all the evidence that were being presented in local courts was a sham, and there was no actual evidence of Russian involvement. The prosecutors produced a receipt that showed money for the coup plot was wired from the G.U. headquarters in Moscow via Western Union to specific members of the opposition party. The facts appeared odd- I knew spy agencies never worked that way. They would never have left such obvious paper trails. It did seem more like a set-up but I had no clue who might have framed Russia for the coup.

My friend begged me to use my American resources and find out the truth. I got to work the next day and enlisted the help of two of my NSA contacts who were now working in the State Department. He alerted his superiors of the matter, but as I expected, the executive director of the Central Security Service of the NSA made it clear that Russia was indeed responsible for the attempted coup in Montenegro. Personally, I was not surprised. Many senior officers and executives of the American intelligence agencies and the military advisors were keen to believe the wildest theory about Russia and were convinced that all the unrest happening in the Euro-Asian continent was the work of a roguish FSB. Frustrated from the lack of support from his superiors, my contact conducted his own research and forwarded his findings to me a week later.

What I saw in those reports were shocking even for me. Two C.I.A. officers were directly involved with the entire coup plot and they worked hard trying to make it appear as though Russia was behind the whole thing. I tracked down one Agency officer who became a private security consultant after returning to the States. He was organizing the Montenegro coup with his friend who owned a security firm in Sarasota. The two men were caught on camera. They were planning to disrupt the election. Montenegro police force

discovered their plot and issued arrest warrants for the C.I.A. officers but they fled the country. However, at the request of the Montenegrin government, the United Arab Emirates border police detained them but the counterterrorism judge of the Emirates court decided to release them and sent them back to America.

I was perplexed by the results of my investigation and somehow felt that I was missing a vital link- who had persuaded the C.I.A. men to carry out the elaborate scheme of framing Russia? This was the second time in this decade that foreign nationals were actively engrossed in making Russia appear like a villain to the NATO. Someone seemed intent of sparking a physical confrontation with the largest nation in the world. I would find out months later the identity of the man who had hired those two Agency officers to carry out a coup in Montenegro in the name of Russia.

The third day that Dustin ignored my calls, I began to worry. The hacker had never been this careless before. In the many years that I had been working alongside him, I never saw Dustin ignore phone calls.

Ever since leaving the Russian orphanage, I avoided making friends. It was too risky for me, and would put them in harm's way. I did not want to endanger anyone else's life. Episodes from my past were painful enough for me to dwell in; I had no desire to brew fresh pain.

I was born in London, to a father who had no love for me in his heart. My mother, who had tried to shelter me from the worst, died when I was still a boy. I was banished from my distant relatives' home and was condemned to live in an obscure Russian orphanage, where hundreds of disabled orphans would be housed along with older children. Discipline was taken so seriously that the slightest sign of agitation would prompt the staff to give the children sedatives to calm them or put them to sleep. I was disturbed by this practice but compared to life in my father's house, I thought this was a relief.

Life in the Siberian orphanage was far from ideal but I did not want to complain. The State lodging were painfully inadequate but at least no one beat or abused me there. Inwardly, I was grateful for not being stuck in a house with my abusive father. His memory frightened and tormented me for years. I was haunted by the sound of his footsteps. My ears would hurt from straining to see if he had come home, if he was angry or drunk again. Every morning, I would anxiously study his face to discern if he was in a foul mood.

Shortly after my seventh birthday, I witnessed the horrors again. My mother was being kicked viciously in her abdomen. She whimpered in pain as my drunken father hit her with anything he could lay his hands on in the kitchen: spoon, forks, utensils and even pots. I believe her skull had fractured that day because she was taken to a hospital and for weeks, had a large bandage around her head. I remember begging her to take me with her and move somewhere else- far away from this terrible beating and abuse. But my mother only shook her head and wept. Her cries of pain haunt me even to this day.

I was a child, condemned to watch and hear his dear mother being battered by an abusive father; powerless to stop the anguish that tore her beloved soul. I wish I could say I wept when I heard my mother getting beaten, but the truth is my tears had died away from constant abuse and belittlement. Fear, hatred and anger had clouded my young mind as I dreamed of ways to save my mother and run away from the hellish abode. Tears are running down my cheek now as I write about that episode of my life, but as a young boy, I had shut my mind out from the trauma in order to believe that everything will become normal soon. I was wrong.

During my late teens, I found solace in the handful of comrades I met in remote locations of Russia. I found their passion, love and enthusiasm to be refreshingly hopeful. Dustin was one the comrades I had grown to rely on. I knew I could depend on the Russian hacker and called him without hesitation from different time zones and never was he too preoccupied to assist, me. Now, this eerie uncertainty was killing me. I toured all five of his known residences and finally reached out to Curtis McDonnell, a data analyst who had worked alongside me at the NSA. Curtis began his NSA career as a cryptologic linguist and was now the Deputy Director for Data Acquisition. He too had been acquainted with Richard and had since worked for the State Department. I explained to him in a few words what was worrying me. Dustin was missing and I needed to track him down, and make sure he was doing okay. Curtis promised to help.

Eighteen hours later, my phone rang. Curtis McDonnell had narrowed three possible location where Dustin may have been held. He zeroed in on the last places his digital signature pinged from and concluded the likeliest point would be a decommissioned nuclear power plant in Pembrokeshire, a county southwest of Wales. I needed no further encouragement and flew to England.

It took me less than an hour to locate the facility. I took care not to take any backup with me; if Dustin was a hostage, the captors would be see them coming. So, I went alone and moved stealthily under the cover of darkness until I was able to enter the deserted compound. My eyes lost vision momentarily as I blinked, trying to get used to the dim interior. An immobile shadowy figure was perched below.

Dustin was seated at the center of the hall. His hands and feet were bound and several layers of duct tape was wound around his mouth. I holstered my weapon and ran to set him free but when Dustin saw me charging towards him, he shook his head so fiercely, I thought he had lost his senses. His glittering eyes locked into mine and he shook his head tearfully and nodded to the floor. My eyes fell

on the thin wires that ran below the chair and seemed to disappear into the floor boards. Then I understood what my dear friend was trying to warn me about. He was bound over a plate trap! Moving him from the pressure plate would trigger the TNT explosion, destroying every living particle within ten yards.

I approached the Russian hacker cautiously and managed to remove the tape that had gagged him. He sighed in relief and warned me not to come any closer. His captors knew I would come to rescue him so they had strapped him to a pressure plate that would detonate if his weight shifted. My heart skipped when I heard this ultimatum. My eyes froze on my friend as I tried to come up with a solution. I asked him if there was any way to disable the bomb- Dustin said the mechanisms were so complicated that it would take an expert hand. A small slip would be fatal.

I was nowhere near as skilled as the hacker so I made a decision. I switched spots with him by carefully removing his feet and replacing it with my own. We made sure the same weight remained anchored to the pressure plate trigger of the bomb. As long as I remained on the bomb's pressure trigger, it would not explode. When I finally managed to balance my weight on the bomb-plated chair, Dustin proceeded to remove a casing from the floor and separate the trigger wires. It took him twenty minutes to cut the wire that connected to the explosives and I tried not to think what would happen if the bomb's trigger wire could not be disabled. For a moment, my mind was filled with an unbearable anguish at the realization that I might lose the closest friend in an instant. Would Dustin and I end up dying in a remote locale, away from civilization, our bodies ripped into shreds, strewn across an abandoned enclave? The thoughts were depressing.

My own fate did not concern me as much as I worried about Dustin. The innocent hacker was embroiled with my dark fate for no other reason except that he had tried to help me. If anything happened to Dustin, it would be entirely my fault. I made him investigate sensitive documents and download classified intel from unauthorized sources so that I could be one step ahead of the people who were planning to attack Europe, Russia or America. Dustin unquestionably assisted me in my endeavors- and now his life was at risk. My vexing thoughts paralyzed me. I did not even notice that my friend had managed to successfully remove the trigger wire from the device. The bomb was disabled. We were safe. Dustin was free again.

It was an exhausting week after which I dismissed my technical operatives and decided to visit Cynthia. I was certain I could turn her by proving to her that the seemingly random terrorist attacks on major hubs in Asia and Europe were deliberate acts of sabotage. Once Cynthia realized how much cruelty Richard was capable of, I knew she wouldn't continue supporting him.

The door to Cynthia's apartment was ajar. Fearing something was amiss, I drew my revolver and entered the hallway. It was empty. The television was on in the living room so I made my way to the TV and lowered the volume.

"Don't move!"

I raised my hand and turned slowly. It was Cynthia. She had her service weapon trained on my chest.

My breath got stuck in my throat. "Cynthia, listen, put the gun down." I said, edging closer to her.

"One more step and I'll shoot, John. I swear."

"Okay, okay. Please, just put the gun down. Why are you doing this?"

"I am turning you in," she said, her voice icy.

"Turn me in?" I repeated. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"You were behind those bombings," Cynthia spat at me. "I saw you. You were at the site. Richard- he showed me the proof. It was you all along. Making a terrorist cell like ISIS famous so you could do your killing under their cover."

I shook my head. "You are making a mistake, Cynthia. I never killed anyone."

"You lied to me," she shouted at me. "I trusted you and all you did was kill innocent people. I saw your picture. You were in Boston. You killed dozens of people."

"No, no!" I started to panic. I didn't know why Cynthia was believing this. "Listen, whatever Richard told you about me, it's a lie."

She should have known, of all the people in the world, she should have known me by now. She had seen me risk my life a million times for strangers who hated me. I risked my life thousands of times. I was supposed to be dead. Why would I risk my life with eminent death and torture if I really wanted to kill people? How could she of all the people believe it?

"Is it?" Cynthia said. "He showed me who you really are. You technically don't exist. You are a Russian assassin who was sent here to spy on American intelligence agencies. Are you going to deny it? You killed people for a living, John."

"I won't deny it, but you don't know the whole story," I pleaded with her and took a step further.

I was so angry I didn't want to believe she was serious.

Cynthia shouted and raised her weapon. "On the ground. Hands behind your back."

My knees trembled as I fought back tears. "Don't do this, Cynthia."

“Now!”

I had no choice but to obey. Cynthia was not going to believe me. She thought I was a criminal who had lied about everything. I couldn't blame her for doing what she thought was right but the pain of betrayal was piercing into my heart like hot knives.

I knew partially what was happening to my life. I was being set up to take the fall for all the crimes Cynthia's stepfather had carried out. Somehow, when Richard figured out that I had traced ISIS back to him, he decided to frame me for all of the murders he committed including the one in LA.

I wept passionately and wrote these lines of prayers to comfort my aching heart:

To Thee I complain of my languished fear,
Of Thine precepts, if I could fairly bear,
Thou had bequeathed a will of infinity,
To nourish them beneath Thy care.

I seek that which Thou can grant,
Thine Divinity being the mightiest and nigh,
Within Thine bounty, make me live,
And in Thy mercy, let me die.

My current dilemma paralyzed me with grief and despair but I was still thinking about what had transpired in the past few months. My dear friend Dustin was so cruelly seized from me. My lover was holding me at gun point and accusing me of doing heinous crimes. All those who I loved were either taken away from me or suffered inhuman pain for me or had been manipulated into hating me. I amassed wealth and power that allowed me to help countries recover from natural disasters and prevent them from warring with one another, but what good did it ever do to me or any of my loved ones? I couldn't make Cynthia love or trust me. I couldn't save my dear friend Dustin from a fate worse than death. While he lay in a vegetative state, the highly skilled doctors and specialists I had summoned could do nothing to save him.

I failed too many people.

I couldn't save my mother. I couldn't give any happiness in her life. With my birth, she fell into despair. Since the day she became pregnant with me, I had brought her only sadness. She suffered the most unbearable pain and anguish and regularly got tortured and eventually died trying to save me. I wish I could give her one day of happiness; maybe then, all the pain in my life would be worth experiencing. But... but I couldn't. I was unable to fill her life with joy and comfort. I thought of my bullions and bitcoins with disgust. How worthless were those! I could access all the currencies in the world but my mother was still dead, suffering to the bitter end. I couldn't change the past, but I dearly wished I could at least create an alternate one.

Cynthia placed me in cuffs and drove me to the NSA office in Fort Meade. I was processed and kept in the holding cell for several hours. Then six men arrived. They had no badges or uniform and accused me of being a terrorist, an enemy combatant who had tried to murder American citizens. My desperate protests fell to deaf ears and I was blindfolded and bundled into the back of an unmarked SUV and taken to an unknown location. Fear of the unknown deluged my brain. I halfheartedly hoped a merciful bullet would pierce my heart, and extinguish all the pain I was feeling. I was a fugitive in this world, and my life itself was my prison. I had never felt more powerless.

Under the heavy hood I was forced to wear, there was no way I could tell where the men had taken me. I was dragged over roughly ten yards of grassy floor and carried to a subterranean abode. There, my hell began.

For the next four months, I was tortured, day in and day out. There was no reprieve. It was a CIA black site. I didn't know where I was but the interrogators assured me that this place officially didn't exist. I was a ghost detainee in a ghost site. They could do whatever they wanted with me. Over and over, I was asked the same questions. They called me a terrorist and believed I had bombed the Russian plane and all the other things Richard had framed me for. I told them I was being framed but the torture only got worse. I was subjected to ice water drowning hundreds of times. On one occasion, I tried to drown myself by inhaling the cold water but they revived me before I could kill myself.

I couldn't take it anymore.

Then they began the electric shocks. Voltage increased with every session of interrogation. I hoped in vain that someone would find me. Perhaps, my contact at the Agency would know where I was. The brilliant engineer who had rescued me from the Balkans two years ago had a knack at finding out everything.

But no one came to rescue me. Months passed and the torture only intensified.

My only grief was that I was still alive.

After what seemed like days, I was given food. Before I managed to take a bite, an interrogator seized the sandwich from my mouth. I was weak from starvation. Oh, I never knew the stomach could ache so terribly from hunger. A man wearing glasses kept the food just beyond my reach. They dangled the food in front of me, wanting me to suffer. Another day without food. I didn't know how long I would be able to survive. I remembered my training in the former KGB colonel's Camp. He used to teach us various mind games to withstand torture.

But my training was failing. I didn't have enough strength to endure this much longer.

It dawned on me that I was suffering, not merely from physical pain, but psychological breakdown. I could not get over the aching tremors in my heart- my beloved Cynthia thought I was a murderer. She didn't believe me.

I was hurting not because Cynthia's stepfather had framed me but because she believed that I was capable of doing the terrible things Richard accused me of. How despondent does one feel when the only woman he loved in this world, the only person he trusted with his life, didn't believe him?

The CIA officers who were interrogating me were trying to do their jobs. They had been trained to extract information from terrorists and now they believed by torturing me, they could prevent future terrorist attacks and save American lives. Despite the pains I was underdoing in their hands, I understood their position. I did not blame them the least for putting me through enhanced interrogation- those poor fools had no way of knowing that I was framed. How could they be certain I was innocent? How would they ever understand that I had become the victim of a procedurally reckless witch hunt and was framed for all of the terrible crimes they had learned about?

It was unfortunate that so many people died in those bombings in Madrid and Bali, and many more innocent civilians had to die in the shootout at the famous Christmas market in front of the Strasbourg Cathedral, but while I regretted being unable to prevent those attacks from taking place, and would go as far to shoulder partial responsibility for it, I was not involved in the bombings or shooting. Yet, Richard had taken great pains to ensure there were plenty of evidence to prove to the courts that I was a deranged killer who had wreaked havoc across continents.

My own predicament scarcely worried me; I was grieving over the loss of my love, my very own Cynthia who had betrayed me at the moment I needed her to be on my side the most. But I could not be angry with her- it was heartbreaking to be distrusted, but who could blame Cynthia for taking Richard's side? He was after all a master manipulator. No, I forgave her long before I had been shuttled to CIA's black site but the agony of being abandoned by a loved one stung the core of my heart.

Life seemed meaningless to me.

What was the point of going on when the ones you loved detests you? There were millions more in this world who needed to be saved, who required vital assistance to survive another day, yet I almost lost the energy to go on.

For a while, I no longer felt enthusiastic to fling myself in death traps to save people.

After all, haven't I been trying to do just that in Paris?

I had gone there with one purpose: to prevent the shooting that I had learned was about to take place. Yet, I could not save innocent lives from being torn into pieces.

I had failed myself. My love had failed me. Everything seemed useless. The world - for me - was dead.

My interrogators began to enjoy my misery so much that they increased the water boarding torture. Drowning is a terrible thing. The sense that one was drowning was so horrible that I don't think any language in the world has the words to describe it. When burly American interrogators held my head under freezing water, the icy liquid would rush up my nose and into my mouth and eyes, causing tremendous pain in my heart and lungs while my whole body convulse uncontrollably as I struggled and kicked desperately to get free. I was determined to die this time but they pulled me up in time and injected me with adrenaline.

My existence was pitiful. I was at their feet is a shameful display of abject fealty. Scores of electrodes and wires were attached to my arms and torso, scorching large portions of my body. With horror, I saw my dead skin hanging from the burn wounds. My tears and sweat had dried to salty crusts over my hollow cheeks. It was a frightening sight, but the torture continued. I felt helpless, like a condemned man who had no choice but to accept his fate.

When I became too exhausted to scream with pain, I would slip into dread and despair. My tearful blinded eyes would beg for mercy, and my heart would cry for help, but there was no reprieve.

Oh, how I wished I had never been born! My existence was a curse. My life was worthless. My body was a thing of disgrace. Why didn't my mother strangle me after my birth? I would have been spared this cruel life had she taken the initiative to snuff out my wistful life.

During one of the interrogation sessions, I must have passed out yet again, but the Agency's persistent inquisitors revived me again and again by injecting adrenaline into my bloodstream. This time, I managed to break a piece of the needle from the syringe and hide it in my mouth. That afternoon, when I was being transported to the electric torture room, I made my move. I unlocked the shackles using the needle tip and broke free. I used a metal chair to knock three men out and used their car keys to escape the underground structure. It was so bright outside that I was nearly blinded. For months, I was forced to stay in the dark. With no hope of life or light. Now, I drove blindly for an hour until a sign on the street said *Welcome to Colorado*. I realized with horror that the black site was inside the United States. I knew the CIA ran illegal interrogations on enemy combatants on foreign countries but I could never imagine that they would be torturing people on U.S. soil.

My escape was short lived. The NSA enlisted the help of the FBI to track me down. I knew I couldn't risk being caught again so I slipped in discreetly into my apartment and began to gather all my belongings. I would have to hide underground for a while until my name was cleared.

I heard the gun being loaded before the metal pressed to the back of my head. I froze.

"You are a fugitive, John," Cynthia's voice echoed behind me. My heart sank. Not again!

"Ira, if you are going to shoot me, you have to kill me now." I told her, fighting to keep my voice steady. "I am not going back with you."

"The NSA ordered us to turn you in." Cynthia stated.

"Do you have any idea what they did to me?" I shouted, pain threatening to burst inside my chest. I remembered the fear of confinement and isolation in the CIA black site. I closed my eyes and spoke tightly. "The CIA took me. They kept me in a black site. Four months, Cynthia. Four months. I was electrocuted and waterboarded more times than I can remember. They- they put metal rings around my head, until I could feel my skull crack, and the blood- from my head- it kept streaming over my eyes... I couldn't see anything. I was suffering."

Cynthia looked confused. "I didn't know that. They said you were being debriefed. I never wanted you to get tortured, John. I only wanted you to face justice. Under the American laws."

"I am not an American, don't you see!" I shouted before I could stop myself. "I don't *exist* in this country. I have *no* passport. *No* birth certificates. I was a ghost to them so the American laws didn't apply to me. The CIA said they could treat me worse than an animal and get away with it because the Justice Department don't know I exist." I lifted my shirt and showed her the deep cuts on my back and abdomen. The skin was raw from the beating I endured from the chain whips. "Do you have any idea what happened to me when you arrested me and handed me over to the Agency? I was tortured terribly, Cynthia! Can't you see I can hardly speak? Three of my front teeth are broken. The authorities said they owned me. They locked me in a pit and said I would rot in there forever."

"This time I am taking you to the FBI, John. I can't let you walk."

I shook my head sadly. In my eyes, I pictured the dreadful scenes of the past several weeks in the CIA black site. The constant ear-splitting music. Hours of submersion in ice water. Volleys of powerful blows and kicks aimed at my face and groin. And not to mention the burning voltage that was administered every hour during electrocution torture. Each time I was given electric shock, the blinding pain would sear into every fiber of my body and make my brain feel like jelly. During torture sessions, my screams of pain often freeze in my parched and constricted throat.

"I am not going back," I said softly, half hoping the woman I loved so desperately would lower her gun and let me walk.

Cynthia thrust her chin up determinedly and steadied her service weapon. She wouldn't let me go, I realized with a terrible pang of grief. My eyes burned so fiercely that I had to blink in rapid succession to maintain a clear vision. This was the end then. After months of torment, I would be sent back to the hell from which I had barely escaped. How had life become so harsh? My throat was bursting from trying to hold back tears.

Cynthia was moving closer, covering the distance between us. She was a professional. I knew she would cuff me as soon as she got within an arm's range. I mumbled an inaudible apology before kicking the gun from Cynthia's hand. She fell with a thud and I ran to the

fire escape. Cynthia retrieved her weapon and fired at my direction but her bullet bounced harmlessly from the window pane. I jumped off the window but not fast enough.

Her second bullet struck my abdomen and made me fall to the ground with a sickening thud. I did not have the luxury to wait and recover so I heaved myself and limped urgently, trying to disappear into the night, half running, half stumbling in the dark street. Spasms of excruciating pain were bursting from my abdomen. Cynthia's bullet must have torn my entrails. The wound was burning with such an intensity that I wanted to scream. Several times, I fell on my own feet and got up and continued moving. I did not think Cynthia was following me but I had to keep moving. She may have alerted the authorities.

The pain of betrayal was too deep and bit into my heart, shattering it into pieces. I ran, not to escape capture, but to get away from my condemned, friendless fate. I saw an overpass several yards ahead. I rushed under the arch and hid in the darkness. Moments later, weakened by wild heart palpitations, my knees collapsed as I readied myself for a ubiquitous death. I crumbled onto the filthy concrete floor and burst into tears like a scared boy.

I had no one to turn to in this world.

I was wounded- and alone.

Helenski, Finland

Matt Leppä worked in the civilian intelligence service, or the Security Police in Finland.

We first met when I was on an undercover mission during my teenage years at the Soviet training Camp.

Although I hadn't met Matt Leppä in many years, I knew he was working for the *Suojelupoliisi*, which was the Finnish counterpart of the American FBI, accountable to the Interior Minister.

Finnish Security & Intelligence Services had hundreds of agents working inside the Russian Federation and they had access to many of FAPSI's networks.

I knew that Finland's military and civilian intelligence services were very efficient and they would have information about the Italian man's whereabouts.

I contacted Matt Leppä and asked him to meet me in the Finland-Russia border.

I recognized Matt at once. He looked gaunt and pale but gave no indication of wanting to remember me. I told him about our joint missions during the Soviet era and the Finnish intelligence officer nodded and asked several questions about me and my work.

I told the man why I was here. I asked for his help in locating the secret prison bases of the Italian-American officer who was framing Russian and Arab entrepreneurs for his own crimes.

"According to our file in *Suojelupoliisi*, the Italian man killed thousands of American servicemen and women for not cooperating with him." Matt Leppä said.

"Why did he kill them and not just let them go?"

"I think it was because he was trying to fool them. We rescued several soldiers and marines of the U.S. Army and they told us that the Italian man approached them posing as a government agent, and he told them that they are secret agents. But in reality, he recruited those American soldiers to work in his own criminal organization and used them to manage all his black sites and groups such as the Taliban."

"What if those men tried to leave Baldassarre Bastico's group? DO you know what happens to them?"

"He kills anyone who does not cooperates with him. Did you notice that nearly five thousand American soldiers and drone operators have died this year?"

"Yes, but they all committed suicide."

Matt shook his head. "No, they did not commit suicide. The Finnish intelligence has evidence that proves that they were killed by assassins who worked for the Italian-American naval commander. Remember, how I told you he controls around twenty black site prisons all over the world? Well, he also kidnapped some of the soldiers and keeps them in those black sites. According to our monthly reports, we know that several American senior military intelligence officers and Russian FSB officers are currently locked up in those black sites."

"Why does he lock them up in those secret prisons?"

Matt Leppä, who worked for the *Suojelupoliisi*, which was the Finnish counterpart of the American FBI spoke calmly.

"Baldassarre Bastico usually frames them for crimes, and sometimes, he keeps them alive for information. As for the FSB operatives, he kidnapped them after they found out that he was using freelance mercenaries to detonate industrial grade explosives in and around government buildings in St. Petersburg."

"But he must have realized that targeting Russian intelligence officers is a very risky thing to do," I suggested.

"The Italian man is not afraid. He is backed by thousands of European and German mercenaries, and has people working inside the U.S. government." Matt Leppä said. "Recently, the CIA told us some unnamed terrorists kidnapped and tortured three American army general when they were on their way to work in Pentagon."

"Who were those terrorists?" I asked.

"The American government thinks they were Arab or Russian terrorists, but in reality, it was the Italian man who did it. He hired mercenaries to kidnap those generals and ordered those criminals to speak in foreign languages, so that when the Army generals got free, they would be able to tell investigators that Russians or Arabs held them hostage. This is how the Italian man and his German friend carries out all the terroristic activities, and frames other people for it."

"Why don't the Finnish Intelligence and Security Services try to stop him?" I asked. "You seem to know a lot about his operations." Matt paused. "We know a lot about Baldassarre Bastico's secret prisons, such as the ones in Norway, but unfortunately, whenever someone tries to expose the truth, the Italian man manages to kidnap him and lock him away in one of the black site prison complexes in Europe."

"He is uploading videos on the dark net and portraying Islam and Moslems as a violent culture," I commented. "It is unfortunate."

Matt Leppä didn't reply immediately. He looked worried and then told me that he does not care about who frames Moslems for crimes.

"Why doesn't it matter?" I asked.

"Listen, I don't care if the Italian man tries to make Islam look like the most violent religion in the world. Everyone hates them already. They have been hating Arabs and Afghans for the last forty years. However, that does not concern me. But it these recent developments that is very worrisome."

"Which development are you talking about?"

The Finnish man working for *Suojelupoliisi* replied. "Right now, the Italian-American Admiral Bastico is planning to use his mercenaries in Afghanistan and pose as Taliban leaders and then use them to occupy all of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and detonate those bombs over the American capital city. He is going to frame Pakistani and Afghan citizens for those atomic bombs."

"What will he gain by killing so many people in nuclear attacks?"

"The Italian criminal will let his country get nuked with bomb, and overthrow the government of the United States." The man from the Finnish Security & Intelligence Services said. "He wants to become the president of America, and seize power by creating a fear of nuclear warfare, and the whole time, American intelligence departments will think that Pakistan or Afghanistan attacked them, and they will retaliate with their own nukes, and fifty or eighty million people in those countries will die."

"Do you know where the prison in Norway is located?" I asked the Finnish intelligence officer.

He nodded and gave me the coordinates.

When Matt Leppä told me that there was a secret CIA prison in Norway, I almost did not believe him. It was impossible! How could a democratic country in Europe allow the Central Intelligence Agency to build torture centers in their country?

I had to investigate the rumor and went straight to Norway.

I saw the head of Norway's Military Center for Terror Analysis, and the Norwegian agreed to help me locate the secret American base, where the Arab prisoners were being held. That afternoon, the director emailed me two separate addresses and a phone number. He said for him, working at the Norwegian Intelligence meant he was able utilize his resources without compromising ethics and contact the American consulate to find out where the secret prison site was. It was fortunate for me, for I immediately went to the secret prison and began to look for ways to break into the huge building.

When I entered the facility in Norway, I saw a frail old man lying in the dark and dirty cell. He could barely speak, but was able to tell me his name. It was Salah bin Mubarak Al Subaie. He was a general in the Yemeni army and he had been a prisoner in this black site for ten years.

I asked the Arab man why he looked so frail and thin, and the he began to speak slowly. I wept as he described what he had experienced in this European prison. The torture Salah bin Mubarak Al Subaie was experiencing was callous and surreal.

For two months, he was forced to withstand the most sophisticated methods of torture. The CIA agents who were interrogating him were not Americans. They were Norwegians, but knew English and Arabic. Those European guards locked him in a solitary soundproof room. It was impossible to tell if it was night or day. Salah's only connection to the outside world was a voice that boomed sporadically from an invisible microphone. The prolonged state of sensory deprivation was affecting his cognitive abilities.

Salah bin Mubarak Al Subaie had been suspended from his wrist, chained to a rod in the ceilings for thirty hours. His captor ensured the chains were shortened to make it impossible for him to rest. His feet would not touch the ground.

The ordeal was endless, and Salah told me he could not bear to talk about his tortures anymore. I began to search for evidence about who was responsible for building this secret prison, and kidnapping General Salah Al Subaie. After going through the declassified records, I found out that an Italian-American Admiral by the name of Baldassarre Bastico owned this black site in Norway. He had hired German and Norwegian mercenary criminals and built this secret prison to kidnap and torture Arab leaders and military generals from other nations, like Russia and Pakistan.

I knew who Admiral Baldassarre Bastico was! He was an Italian born man, who came to America at a young age, but he was desperate to become the president of the United States, and therefore, started to give a lot of attacks and bombings against the current government, but he made sure to blame all of his crimes on the Muslims and Arabs.

One of the main criminal actions the Italian man was trying to do was start a war between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. He wanted to destabilize the Saudi Kingdom and take over their nation's economy, so he met with several Yemeni military leaders and supplied them with high tech drones. Then, Bastico ordered them to throw those drone bombs over at Saudi Arabia. General Salah bin Mubarak Al Subaie told me he refused to obey the Italian man's instructions, and did not bomb Saudi Arabia. But the Italian Admiral immediately hired German mercenaries and made them launch a tirade of rockets and bombs in to Riyadh, and this caused the Saudi government to become very angry. The Saudi Arabian leaders thought Yemen was attacking them. They did not know that it was the Italian mafia man who was actually behind all of these criminal activities. Soon, the Saudi king ordered the military to bomb Yemen, and lot of people died in this unnecessary war. Salah bin Mubarak Al Subaie told me he contacted Saudi military leaders and told them the truth and showed them some proof about the evil Italian naval commander. Salah tried to tell his Saudi counterparts that Baldassarre Bastico was the person who bombed Riyadh.

When Admiral Bastico found out that Salah was confessing the truth to the Saudi Arabian leader, he immediately arrested and kidnapped Salah and took him to a secret prison in Norway, where no one could ever find him. It was in this icy and freezing prison that this kind-hearted Yemeni general was locked up and tortured for many years. I was only glad that I was able to rescue him before it was too late.

The third time Dustin was targeted, I could feel there was little hope of rescuing him. For thirteen days, none of my freelance hackers were able to track his locations and neither were they able to tap into global satellite feed. Two weeks of gruesome despair plagued me until I managed to find Dustin, barely alive, in an underground cell. His body was brutally impaired and bruised. It did not take an expert to know that my friend had been mercilessly tortured.

The Russian hacker, who I had known since my late teens was now in a vegetative state, almost as good as dead. Richard spared no effort to debilitate him and render his skills useless by putting the earnest codebreaker through vicious torture. Dustin had been punished for being my friend, for helping me and for finding out all about Richard's elaborate plans to seize money and weapons from illegal arms dealers worldwide. I cannot know till this day what other forms of psychological and physical trauma Dustin had endured in Richard's hands but medical tests showed that his ear drums were repeatedly perforated with sharp needles and the torturers stuck metal rods up his nose to destroy the front part of his brain. This caused Dustin to become comatose.

My dear friend was now in a hospice, void of most memories and only a ghost of his robust past. At times, I miss him desperately. Who could not cherish the enthusiasm Dustin had to save those in distress? The technical genius served the world and its citizen utterly selflessly and now there was none to mourn him.

It was surreal. My brain refused to acknowledge the reality. *Dustin was really in a vegetative state.* My most trusted associate and the brightest computer programmer I had ever known was gone.

I knew life would never be the same without him by my side.

December, 2015

A month later, I was heading to my safehouse in Seattle where two of the men I rescued from an extortionist mob had temporarily set base. I hoped to keep them hidden from their opponents until the court agreed to take them into witness protection. When I arrived at the single story house, a dark sedan with blacked out windows was parked across the house. I was alarmed. No one was supposed to know I gave shelter to the two mob victims. I stayed in the blind spot and approached the car from the rear. Before I could yank the door open, a man got out. I staggered when I saw the man sitting in the front seat.

“Liam?” I said tentatively.

“Who else would I be?” Liam Fleetwood smiled.

Liam Fleetwood was a former officer at the Special Collection Service, a highly classified U.S. government black budget program that was created to combat global terrorism and protect America and its Allies. We crossed paths when I was still working under Richard’s jurisdiction in the NSA, and Liam would often accompany me on overseas mission in order to coordinate intelligence gathering and surveillance. His department was clandestine and officially didn’t exist.

Codenamed F7, this joint U.S. Central Intelligence Agency–National Security Agency program conducted secret surveillance in both hostile and friendly nations, and Liam had been personally responsible for maintaining secure communication lines between spies in Central America.

My former NSA colleague looked haggard. I searched his face before asking, “What is it, Liam? Trouble?”

“Man, I am glad to see you, John,” Liam gave me friendly pat on the back and dropped on one of the low metal benches on the pedestrian walkway. “Have you kept in touch with your family?”

“Family?” I repeated, at a loss as to what he was referring to.

“The mother you said you discovered after coming to the United States,” Liam reminded me.

I smiled at the memory. “Of course, I remember. Do you know anything about them?” I said, adding truthfully, “I honestly hadn’t been able to keep in touch. How many sons does she have now? Four or five?”

“Five,” Liam said.

“Wow, I missed the last ones,” I admitted.

“Well, it’s good to miss them- while they are still alive,” Liam muttered, his voice dark with worry.

“What do you mean, Liam?”

“What I mean is that despite our best efforts, and doubling their security details, I don’t have faith that I can keep your mother or her children alive.”

“Liam, you need to stop speaking in such cryptic language,” I raised my voice slightly, getting impatient. “Can you at least explain to me what kind of security teams are guarding my mother and why she would be in danger in the first place?”

“Oh, Jeez, you really don’t know?” Liam looked flustered.

I tried to keep my voice level. “Know what?”

“I hired a backup security team to keep the family safe. My instructions to them were clear: never let your family off their sights.”

My bewilderment shone on my face. “Why, though? What made you think they were in danger?”

Liam looked as if I had lost my memory. “You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?”

“You called me from Ömsköldsvik on a winter night. Told me someone had injected you with a toxic substance that had no antidote and the blackmailer promised to give you the cure if you killed a prominent local politician.”

My brows furrowed as I tried to recall the incident.

“I was in Sweden.” I said, my mind momentarily fleeing to the cold December night.

It was New Year’s Eve. I was hiding behind a mound of snow, trying to keep warm. My target was inside one of the stone mansions by the shores of Lake Vättern.

Sixteen hours earlier, I was making way to my boathouse near Long Beach when three balaclava clad men jumped me and emptied a syringe in my arm. Before I could recover from the shock of being assaulted in my own home, the men had left, but they left behind a folder with an untraceable burner phone. Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang. The caller spoke in a garbled mechanical voice and informed me that I had twenty-four hours to live. Ignoring my rage, he explained how I had been injected with a toxic nerve agent that was designed to destroy my vital organs gradually. Within twelve hours, I would begin to feel the effects of the drug. Unless an antidote was administered within the first twenty hours, my heart and lungs would fail and I would be brain dead soon after. As the man spoke, I tried to keep my heart calm and asked him where I could find the antidote. There was a pause and the man told me to open the envelope

and check its content. There was a photo of a white-haired man. I didn't need to read the caption to know it was the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

"What do you want with the UN?" I had demanded.

The unnamed caller didn't speak for a moment. "We want you to eliminate the target."

"I don't kill innocent people," I bit out angrily.

There was a long pause. "The nerve agent you have been injected with will begin to take effect in your bloodstream within two hours. Unless you receive the specific antidote, you have no choice but to obey our commands."

"I'd rather die than listen to you," I insisted, "and besides, I can find an antidote for this myself."

"I doubt that," the man responded. "The toxin in your blood was custom made. We have the precise antidote to render it harmless. If you follow your orders, we can save your life."

I realized at that point that I had no choice. Although I knew the criminals who infected me with the nerve agent would not honor their deal even if I went through with the assassination, but I also knew if I refused to listen to them, they would send another hitman to take out the United Nation's secretary general. This was my only chance to warn the global diplomat and save his life. I took a deep breath and told the man I would do what they required of me. Chuckling satisfactorily, the caller gave me the coordinates of the target. The target was in Sweden.

I landed at the Jönköping Airport at the behest of the unknown caller. He had promised to deliver me the antidote of the poison I was injected with as soon as he found proof that the UN diplomat was killed.

Spasms of headache was plaguing me and I knew that the poison was spreading into my circulatory system. There wasn't enough time to warn the secretary-general or fake his death. I needed outside help so I called my dear friend Dustin and asked him to find out who may have been behind the attack on me. Dustin back traced the surveillance footages around my boat house and was able to track a license plate number he had captured from a birdhouse camera three miles from my residence. The vehicle belonged to a shell company that Cynthia's father once used to purchase a property near Laguna Beach. When Dustin emailed me the photo of the car, I noticed it right away. I had seen Richard drive that Ford Mustang to Cynthia's baby shower last year. It was impossible for me to imagine that Richard had something to do with my poisoning, but Dustin assured me that the three men who attacked me with the injection were dropped off this location by the Ford Mustang. Although I wasn't convinced that Cynthia's father wanted to blackmail me into killing the UN secretary-general, I decided to contact Cynthia and share my concerns.

My beloved Cynthia was livid when she heard about my condition. She was working inside the NSA building with her father and promised me she would ask him for help right away, but I stopped her. I told her there was a chance Richard was involved with injecting me with a nerve agent, so it would be wiser for her if she could tell him that she herself had been accidentally infected with the same nerve agent.

As much as Richard was callous, I knew he was not a heartless man and he truly loved his daughter. Cynthia obeyed my instructions and told her father that she was somehow injected with the toxic nerve agent and needed the antidote. Richard was not a fool and I knew this well. There was no way he would believe that his daughter had been injected with the same nerve agent which I had been infected with, so I had taught Cynthia to damn myself. I begged her to tell her father that I infected her with the same strain of nerve agents which some mysterious attackers had injected me with. Miraculously, Richard appeared moments later with a blue capsule and ordered Cynthia to ingest it right away. He said the antidote would cure her completely. Cynthia pretended to swallow it and ran to exit the building. She had promised to bring me the antidote without delay.

Richard must have anticipated that Cynthia would try to save my life or bring the antidote to me so he placed the entire NSA building on lockdown. For the next twelve hours, no one would be allowed in or out. Cynthia was trapped. She called me on my burner cell from a secure line and told me what had happened. We both knew I couldn't survive for another twelve hours without the antidote. My body was slowly becoming weak and feverish and I began to experience momentary blackouts. I thought hard and gave Cynthia a new set of instructions. I asked her to tell Richard that I was in southern Sweden, awaiting extraction. Cynthia pretended to be angry with me for infecting her with the poison that was in my blood stream and asked her dad to arrest and imprison me for life. Richard was pleased with the suggestion and despite the lockdown, prepared a two-man strike team to grab me. The tactical force was in the ammunition room, gathering their gears when Cynthia went in, pretending to assist them with loading the weapons. She tactfully slipped the antidote capsule into the left jacket pocket of one of the men. Before they were ready for takeoff, Cynthia called me one last time and told me where she had hidden the capsule. All I had to do now was wait for the men to come to my location and try to arrest or grab me, so that I could retrieve the antidote from the NSA black op team member's pocket. By the time the strike team arrived in Sweden, I was terribly weak and nearly dead. But it was not too late. I waited until the two men approached my hiding place before

ambushing them. They were knocked out cold and I extracted the capsule from one of the man's left pocket. The pale blue capsule was there. I was immensely grateful to Cynthia for going out of her way to save my life.

My eyes were staring into the distance as I recalled the incident vividly but my friend did not notice.

Liam was nodding wisely. "I knew that, but I was across the Atlantic and could do nothing to help you. When you called me, you said the poison began to affect your vitals and that you had less than five hours to live. And you asked me for one favor."

"I don't remember," I admitted. "What did I ask for?"

"You said: take care of my family, and try to help them out if they ever fall into financial crisis. I didn't even know who were referring to at that time. You never told anyone of us of the Russian woman who clearly became a surrogate mother to you, but after I got off your call, I searched through your travel itinerary and your travel logs matched pinged at the same place numerous times. I found your family and set up a protective team to watch over them."

"What sort of protective team?"

"I obviously didn't know any super-elite team of bodyguards so I contacted Philippe Lafont, an old acquaintance at the GIGN, who had contacts at Europol and Netherland's AIVD. The guy owed me his life so when I asked for his help, Philippe arranged to have an elite team of Dutch security guards flown over to the States and offer round the clock protection for your family."

"You did that for me," I breathed, my voice tightening with emotion.

"Hey, you think I would ever forget what you did for my twins?" Liam said, his eyes clouding with reminiscence. "I didn't think I would see them again, and *you* risked your life and stayed undercover with those bastards in order to find the precise location in which the kidnappers hid them."

I shook my head to dismiss his gratitude but Liam continued. "I know this family is important to you, and I also know what happens when people in our line of work have loved ones who are in the open. They become targets, the way my kids became a pawn for my enemies. So, I did what any friend would do, John, I asked Phillipe to arranged a protective detail to keep surveillance on the Russian woman and her children, and boy, I am glad I did that."

"Were they targeted?" I asked, suddenly apprehensive. The thought of my mother falling into danger made my heart throb painfully.

"I am afraid they were more than just targeted, John. I spoke to the man in charge of their security. Douglas Clive. A former FBI special agent who volunteered to protect your family with his life. He arrested two men last year who admitted to trying to abduct your sister. The girl was on her way to college when the thugs tried to corner her before pulling her into a waiting van. If Clive's men weren't there, I don't want to think what would have happened."

"What about the five boys? Were they under attack?"

"The boys are all older. They moved out; four of them are married. Three has kids of their own and live in other states. No, they were not targeted or abducted. It seems that numerous forces are after the little girl."

"Who were they?" I asked. "The kidnappers?"

"It wasn't easy to trace them to their employers. But the one we captured early last year was more cooperative. We were following your sister ads she headed to college, and the surveillance team reported that a construction company was blocking the usual route. Eight roads were blocked completely and the only road that was open lead to an abandoned warehouse. We zoomed on the satellite images and saw that the building was crawling with unidentified men with machine guns and a military grade chopper was perched on the roof. It was obvious that someone had planned an elaborate abduction. I told Phillipe's security team to stick close and Clive called in the FBI and local police. They made some arrests at that warehouse and on the road. We were not surprised to find out that the construction workers were phony. But I was relieved that we were able to save your sister."

"So, who did they work for?" I repeated my question.

"Yeah, the men Clive arrested admitted that they were paid to abduct the girl and hand her over to a pickup team near South Ferry Station. A shipping container was waiting at the harbor and the girl was scheduled to be transported across the Atlantic. Her final destination was the Port of Latakia."

"I've never heard of that port," I said. "Where is it?"

"It is Syria's main seaport, located in the city of Latakia."

"Why did the kidnappers want to take her there?"

"Only one of them knew the entire plan. He was acting under the orders of a German man. The mission objective was to hand the girl over to a sex-jihad camp in northern Syria where alleged fighters held orgies with local women. It was technically a brothel. Dozens

of women were living there. They freely gave interviews where they claimed to be kidnapped brides for the ISIS fighters. We later discovered that it was a publicity stunt. The women admitted to being paid handsomely for providing false testimonies.”

“I heard about the ISIS fake sex cults but what does that have to do with the Russian woman’s daughter?”

“On the orders of the German man, the kidnappers planned to dump her at the brothel and have her raped by the men there. They were instructed to video tape the whole thing and send it to him.”

“What the hell!” I exclaimed. “Are you saying my sister was about to be trafficked into a sex ring?”

“It seemed worse than that,” Liam admitted. “The German man had given specific instructions concerning the kidnapping. Since they were afraid the FBI would take over the kidnapping case and begin a nationwide manhunt, their first job was to make a confession video in which they were ordered to coerce and torture the kid into admitting that she left the house on her own will, in order to join the ISIS terrorist organization, and volunteered to become a terrorist’s sex-jihad bride.”

“That is sick.” I closed my eyes, unable to make sense of the bizarre report. “How could they prove something so absurd?”

“Your sister’s phone was dropped near the NY harbor. When Clive’s men retrieved it, they saw it was tampered with. The kidnappers made it look as though she had lost the phone. The strangest thing was her phone contained fifty gigabytes of data documenting her life with the ISIS fighters as their willing concubine. It was a thorough frame job- thousands of chat messages and photographs, flight details and screenshots of official documents- everything to convince the authorities that it was not a kidnapping.” Liam continued. “The whole idea was to make the FBI cease searching for the girl. If they thought she had fled the United States to become a terrorist bride in Syria, then no one would feel too sorry for her. WE even found the detailed transcript of the video that was to be broadcast. I can’t begin to day how lucky we got that day by preventing those sick f*****s from taking your sister.”

“And all this time, I had no idea,” I repeated, dazed by my own ignorance.

“I was more perplexed by the terrorist angle. It was ironic that the abductors were planning to paint your sister as a terrorist who wanted to marry Syrian IS fighters when she had recently converted from her father’s religion and adopted a new name and identity following a brief trip to Moscow and St. Petersburg.”

“Which religion is that?”

“She had taken up the life style the nuns after meeting with the Abbess of an Orthodox monastery. During her visit to Russia four years ago, she stayed with her mother’s relatives and met with the clergy of the patriarchal cathedral. The teenager was besotted with the monastic life and vowed to remain like the nuns. Her mother disapproved, obviously, and since returning to America, we witnessed great disagreement and verbal altercation in the family over her planned vows.”

“How did you find out about what the rest of the family thought about it?” I interrupted.

“Oh, that,” Liam said easily. “Philippe’s men wire tapped your mother’s house- for precautionary measures, naturally. We have ears inside. So, yes, there were severe disagreements. No one in the family approved of the teenager becoming a nun, but she seemed determined. From the conversation we gleaned, it appears that the mother didn’t allow the girl to shear her hair, as is required of nuns. They also managed to stop her from visiting Russia, since it was there, she got converted into orthodoxy. From what we learned, the girl seemed serious about becoming a lifelong nun. So, you can imagine how unconventional it sounded to us when we learned that the pain German man had ordered his thugs to force your sister to make a video swearing allegiance to the Middle Eastern terrorist group called ISIS.” Liam paused. “Clearly, the guy had no idea how fake his whole plan was going to look like.”

“What else did you find out about the German man’s background?” I inquired, studying the photograph Liam had handed me. The man looked oddly familiar yet I could not recall his name. I looked at my friend. “His real name?”

Liam sighed. “Bruno Grünewälder, sixty-nine years old. Born and raised in Hungary but lived in Düsseldorf and immigrated to the United States in 2004, a year after his wife, who happened to be the daughter of a wealthy man, died from suicide. Mörsenbroich Police investigated the death as a possible homicide but the husband was soon exonerated. As for background information, we traced his family history. No sign of mental disorder or criminal activities. His father came from a perfectly bourgeois family, raising the son to be a society-oriented person who appears to revel in adulation, and is presently standing for local city elections. For now, he is aiming to be a mayor.”

I knew I had seen Bruno before. His smile looked familiar. I had seen him at a gym. It was around 2008. In Hawaii. I was working out when he began to talk to me. I must have passed out because when I awoke, I was in a sound-proof apartment. An intravenous needle was attached to my arm. My body felt paralyzed. Bruno was standing by the IV drip and increased the dosage of whatever was in the plastic bag.

I felt groggy. The solution that was being administered into my vein must have been a toxin. When I asked him what was going on, he just laughed and said I would die a slow death. I was unsure of what he meant, but I realized much later that he must have drugged me in the gym and brought me to his house.

I managed to escape by pretending to faint and when Bruno left my side momentarily, I ripped off the needle and fled the vicinity. It was not enough that Cynthia's stepfather hired this man to kill me, but he wanted the same man to go after my family and assault my sister. All because I had the audacity to take his beloved Cynthia from him. Richard's depravity was beginning to stun me and I didn't want to think to what lengths he was prepared to go to hurt me.

Liam was studying the distant expression on my face. He looked worried.

"Criminal records?" I prompted him. "Of this suspect."

"Nonexistent. This one does not appear to be a criminal at all. Although he had been quite busy since his arrival in the United States. If our bank records are reliable, then it seems that Grünewälder came under Richard's employment since 2008."

"That was years back. Why did Cynthia's father hire this man over a decade ago?" I wondered aloud.

Liam Fleetwood ran his hand over his head. "The CIA traced Richard to having links to several private military companies including Blacksand, an elite group contracted by the US government since 2005. Those mercenaries mainly served as Praetorian Guards for the State Department's diplomats until the gunslingers became reckless and participated in unsanctioned shootings and destruction of civilian property. Eighteen Blacksand security contractors were found guilty of numerous massacres in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guatemala and Cuba. When Blacksand lost its license to operate in Iraq, Richard suffered a financial breakdown because he was heavily invested in them. Since 2008, Richard's offshore bank accounts went haywire but we traced almost seven hundred million dollars that he wired to a numbered account in the Liechtensteinische Landesbank. Only one man had the power of attorney to that account and he also made hundreds of withdrawals."

"Who?"

"Bruno Grünewälder."

"Okay, so he has been working for Richard," I stated, "but what was his job? A man with seemingly no unique skillset- why would Richard pay him millions of dollars?"

"Grünewälder may not be a regular criminal but he appears to be a white-collar criminal. He is not affiliated with any government office or law enforcement agency. In addition to publicizing several ISIS's sex slave markets near the Turkish-Syrian border, the Special Collection Service's counterintelligence division have evidence linking him to several high-profile bombings. While it does not appear as though he personally carried out any of the attacks, his job was documenting a car attack in Charlottesville, Bloomington, as well as two New York City truck attacks. He emailed false narrative to news outlets that showed those attacks were done in the name of the terrorist group called ISIS. The NYPD really thought the culprit of the vehicle ramming incident at a Home Depot was an ISIS-inspired man."

"What about the projects you mentioned: he made several hundred ISIS propaganda videos? How violent are those?"

"He's not the bomber, you know, but certainly a manipulative son of a b****. Richard put him in charge of creating and distributing all the ISIS sex videos and all the publicity of the alleged war brides in Iraq and Syria. He admitted to making the ISIS love camps as well, but insisted it was purely his idea. Apparently, Richard neither knew nor cared about the sex slavery propaganda."

"But what is this love camp Grünewälder was talking about?"

"Quite simply, those are brothel of sort. When we pressed him for more information about why he named the brothel *Naza Love Camp*, Grünewälder told our interrogator he was trying to sound original and from his meager knowledge of German history, he remembered the Nazi love camps where they coerced female prisoners of the holocaust concentration camps to serve Nazi soldiers and guards. He thought ISIS love camp would resonate with the theme. And to make it even more poetic, the German dude said he made sure the slave sex-jihad camps were all based inside mosques, you know worship places, because he said he was always a bit fascinated to learn that Nazi army commanders in France would always turn local Jewish synagogues into military brothels for their soldiers and sometimes, they forced the Rabbi's daughters to serve the *Wehrmacht* men. It all sounded crazy but Grünewälder genuinely was getting these ideas from his own country's history. The security team couldn't believe what they were hearing at first- about the Iraqi-Syrian terror cell, I mean."

"Why?"

"After Blacksand was disavowed by the U.S. government, Richard, who was a major shareholder of the security contractor, dismantled the group and in early 2009, he used his assets to make another black op group- except, this time he didn't associate it with any American or European agency. He called it ISIS and redirected his assets in Iraq to organize the fake terrorist cell. While those mercenaries did most of the leg work for ISIS, many locals and Iraqi and Yazidi known criminals and prison inmates were recruited and trained by the remnant of Blacksand members. The Middle Eastern men were then tasked with carrying out various illegal activities, including roadside bombings, spray shootings and finally, declare a little kingdom in the Iraq-Syria border."

“I know Richard was behind the creation of ISIS- but he took great pains to frame Russia for it. I saw the money trail. He made it appear as though the Russian government funded ISIS activities.”

“That he did,” Liam admitted. My friend bit his lips, his eyes squinting in confusion. “We did however find an anomaly. It was about those scores of videos and interviews that the BBC, ANN and other international news media constantly broadcasted. Hundreds of Iraqi and Yazidi women starred in interviews and documentary films claiming to be ISIS sex-fighters. Some claimed to be rented brides while many gave detailed testimonies about how they were sold into slavery and had to serve hundreds of fighters. We cooperated with eight employees of Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and they were able to track down twenty-nine women who claimed to be sex-slaves in the YouTube videos. Upon interrogation, the women admitted to be volunteers-”

“What do you mean, volunteers?” I repeated.

“They were hired by some unnamed men and were paid in dollars for the sole job of giving interviews and making some graphic videos. Some of the women who gave interviews were poor villagers who were in it for the money. They didn’t have to make sex tapes obviously but had to give interviews saying how brutally Iraqi and Syrian fighters raped them. They also had to claim that all their pimps and slave traders were Russian. But most of the videos were made by former inmates of women’s prison. Dozens of women from the Kadmiya Women's Prison were freed on this condition.”

“World media was buzzing over those videos and interviews,” I recalled.

“Yes, Grünewälder’s PR team visited one of the brothels around the border area and recruited seventy women. They told us how they were excited to go on camera and make sex tapes and other porn videos, in the name of ISIS. They were paid promptly. A few women said their employers paid in dollars and asked them to be graphic. Those who performed well were granted passports to Europe.”

“How can you be sure Grünewälder was behind the ISIS sex ring?”

“We traced the money that was used to fund the sex camp. The bank account belonged to Bruno Grünewälder, the same man who had hired those swine to abduct your sister. Grünewälder didn’t just make propaganda videos, he also recruited numerous Yazidi women to give interviews and pose in other graphic videos, like beheading or what not. Their job was to go on live television and read prepared scripts. Now, it seems that Grünewälder’s whole plan of making these videos was to use it as a buffer when he kidnapped your sister. He wanted to make it look as though she had joined ISIS as a fighter’s bride while he hired over a hundred men to gang rape her repeatedly and record the brutal encounters.”

Unshed tears filled my eyes, until I could suppress it no longer. The agony was unbearable and I turned my face away from Liam, weeping morosely into the shadows. I wanted to scream in anguish but my throat was again constricted. What could I, one man, do against such a powerful brute force? The criminals Richard had hired were inordinately skilled, desperate for power and money, and had no contention to destroy the lives of a little girl? They would take my sister and my mother away and torture them to death. I was living under the constellation of ignorance while my health deteriorated each passing day. I was a stranger in my own life, powerless to protect the ones I loved. Did I even have the right to die when my family was condemned to the most vicious fate?

“Why, Liam?” I grabbed my friend’s arm and spoke beseechingly. “I don’t even know the Russian woman’s family members personally. I’ve never met them! Why is Richard doing this? Why is he sending goons after that obscure family?”

“I think the old man is becoming more and more frustrated because you dismantled his powerhouse and had him kicked out of NSA. I believe it is his way of taking revenge. He can’t get to you so he started hiring men to kidnap your sister and cause you pain.”

“Why does he think the little girl matters to me?”

“Cynthia’s stepfather probably assumed the girl was special to you as Cynthia was special to him.”

“That is absurd,” I blurted out. “I have never even met her. I didn’t know the Russian woman had a daughter.”

“Richard miscalculated. He was wrong, of course, but it didn’t make any difference in his methods or what he planned for her. He hired assassins, rogue agents, businessmen, politicians, any young man he found, he sent them after the girl, believing in a twisted idea that you were somehow romantically interested in the young girl and violating her would be the ideal revenge.”

“But Richard is in prison. I myself saw it. He is in a secure location as we speak.”

“How did you manage that?” My friend sounded stunned.

“I didn’t, really. It was Cynthia. I showed her the evidence and she believed me when she saw how he created ISIS and used his private security company to profit off the fake terrorist organization. How he used the organization to threaten governments and use the government to do his work. She went through all the evidence with several high level investigators, the money transfer, the pictures of his black ops agents hanging out with ISIS members and giving them money and recording of instructions they were handing out. Every image, every phone call, every bank account, every fake identity, every video, and the distribution of their media coverage, every single bomb material, everything, every last evidence we could salvage. She handed him over to the CIA. He’s in their custody now.”

“You’re talking about his daughter Cynthia?” Liam said awkwardly. “Aren’t you two – I mean you were together?”

“Was. Past tense,” I responded tightly. “I miss her but, um, she is dating someone else.”

“Do we know him?”

I shook my head. “Gérald Sarközy, a young entrepreneur. He’s French. Works as an attaché in the country’s Intelligence Community. He is a nice guy. They seem to get along fine.”

“Why don’t you talk to her, John? I know how close the two of you were...”

“A lot has changed,” I interrupted my friend. “After I got out of that black site, it was too much for me. And Cynthia still can’t forgive me for making her turn her father- well, stepfather in to the authorities.”

“Richard is evil! That mother****r hired sex traffickers to kidnap and sell your sister into slavery. I just hope the CIA gives him the lethal injection.” Liam paused and took a deep breath. “Now, I am getting more and more worried because from what my security team tells me, Grünewälder is not the only thug Richard hired. At least two other men were actively pursuing your sister; both seemed determined to be abduct her. I identified the alias of one of the Eastern European goons. Roumen Jeliazkov.”

“What is that man after?”

“They all want the same thing. Richard promised them hundreds of millions of dollars and euros if they are able to successfully abduct your sister and sell her to human sex traffickers.”

“Why do they agree to listen to Richard?” I blurted out. “Don’t they know how he works? He always eliminates his employees. And he would never pay them the promised cash either. I’ve seen it myself. He hires assassins to take out a rival but always executed the assassin personally.”

“Men like Grünewälder and Jeliazkov are in this ugly business for the money. I mean Richard offered them nearly a billion dollars each. And for what- making a bunch of sex videos. My suggestion is to take out all of the hired men. That’s the only way to keep your family safe.”

“No, Liam, that would be a mistake.” I insisted.

“A mistake? Bro, I’ve seen how dangerous Jeliazkov and Grünewälder can become. We have to shut down their plans.”

“Can you imagine what any other criminal gangster would do if they had been offered billions? If we take out these hired goons, Richard will make his firm put my sister in the open market. What do you think random cartels, mafias and mercenaries would do then? They would rip her into pieces.”

“Knowing these depraved people exist in our world, it makes me regret having kids,” Liam sighed. “What if their lives become endangered?” He frowned thoughtfully at the floor. “But you are right; killing them isn’t going to solve the problem. I’ve spent some time with street gangs during my Agency undercover assignments and I can tell you this: some low-level illegal arms dealers and drug suppliers were worse. I’ve seen them butcher people for ten bucks. If those criminals were offered one billion dollars to smuggle a girl and sell her to human traffickers or lock her in a brothel, you have no idea how zealously they would carry out the order.”

“Yes, if we want to solve this problem, then we need to get to the bottom of this.” I stated.

Liam nodded. “My priority was to divert resources to remove the hit off her back. I am glad that the ISIS craze has abated now; I have one less thing to worry about.”

“I don’t understand. Why would one man concoct a mammoth narrative like the ISIS sex-slave bride and publicize their camps only to make a kidnapping attempt look natural?”

My friend Liam looked distressed. “Grünewälder surpasses all expectations when it comes to manipulation. While I believe Richard had ulterior motives when he ordered his Blacksand security contractors to create the ISIS terror network, he did not order anyone to make all those cultish videos of holy sex-brides. It was the sole brainchild of Bruno Grünewälder. The German-Hungarian dude hoped to kidnap your sister and lock her away in one of the ISIS sex-jihad camps.”

“Why?”

“When my security team interrogated him, Grünewälder admitted that he would only get paid his promised millions if he supplied videos of at least a hundred men having sex with the little girl. He arranged for paid men to be at that Syrian camp to rape and impregnate her. Richards apparently promised to double the money if she conceived.”

“You mentioned there was an incident in my sister’s college campus early this year. Who was behind it?”

Liam shot a nervous look at me. “The same Bruno Grünewälder. He was trying to pull off another one of his stunts.”

“ISIS didn’t exist anymore,” I reminded my former colleague. “I worked hard in sync with Russian and US government intelligence agencies to shut down Richard’s remaining ISIS network. If Grünewälder was obsessed with making it look as though my sister ran away to ISIS, then why was he making another attempt to kidnap her?”

“Ah, but I never said it was a kidnapping attempt, John. It was far worse.”

“Worse?” I repeated. “I don’t understand.”

“Douglas Clive, the former FBI special agent I placed in charge of your family’s security, well, he filled me in on the details. It was frightening for the Bureau to discover they had moles within their close circle.”

“What happened?” I pressed Liam for more details.

“Well, right after I asked Clive to look after your mother and sister, he set in place nine special agents to watch over them. A year later, your sister got into the prestigious Ivy League school in Manhattan and three members of the security detail tagged along. I gave them specific instructions never to leave the girl out of sight for even a minute. Fortunately, they obeyed my instructions to the letter and two months into her first semester, I heard the strangest story from the agents.”

“What happened?”

“Initially, Clive’s men and Philippe’s bodyguards who were protecting the family maintained a certain distance. They followed your sister’s vehicle as she commuted to college, but following an alert from the CIA’s counterterrorism center, they increased vigilance.”

My ignorance was making me impatient. “What exactly happened with the Agency?”

“We were unsure at first; there were multiple alerts going around CIA’s investigative departments. And more than once, your sister’s name came up.”

“How?” I sighed, exasperated.

Liam Fleetwood paused and rubbed his forehead. “A senior officer at the CIA’s New York office informed me that they received an urgent request from the head of the cybercrime unit, Solomon Brunstein. His seventeen-year-old daughter Rifka, who was a freshman at an Ivy League university in New York City was approached by several men claiming to be CIA field operatives. They asked her to spy on one of her friends, a fellow classmate. The friend in question was none other than your sister. Rifka was given a unique thumb drive and the men had instructed her to plug the device into your sister’s laptop and other electronic device. And that wasn’t all. Rifka was ordered to be discreet and insert the thumb drive into several other students in the same class- essentially anyone your sister interacted with.”

“Did the so-called CIA men tell her why she had to spy on her friends?”

“Yes, they stated that your sister was a very dangerous ISIS terrorist who was recruiting followers in college and the only way to prove her guilt was by attaching the drive to her electronic devices.”

“What did Rifka Brunstein do? Did she comply?”

“She’s a smart girl. When the mysterious men told Rifka that your sister was a terrorist, she doubted it and instead of plugging the electronic device into all her classmates’ laptops, she called her dad who worked at the CIA and told him what happened. Solomon Brunstein was alarmed. His brother, Jeff Brunstein was a United States senator, and the two men tried to get to the bottom of this fiasco. They realized their daughter or niece was being targeted by a criminal group and was eager to protect Rifka. Solomon conducted his own investigation and couldn’t identify any of the so-called CIA officers prowling through this Ivy League university classrooms. Brunstein was convinced the men were imposters and were using his daughter for some ulterior cause and so he brought in the Agency’s tech support group and had them inspect the thumb drive.”

“What was in the drive?”

“A lot of data. Transcripts of hundreds of phone calls, text messages, even photos, selfies and videos of terrorists brandishing weapons. But the reason we became embroiled in all of it was because in all of the text messages or emails that were recorded in the drive, there was a signature mark of your sister.”

“It was a classic way to plant evidence,” I remarked, recalling how Richard had framed me for a bombing several years ago using similar methods.

Liam nodded. “Prerecorded messages, doctored emails and text messages to people around her. If that thumb drive was attached to your sister’s laptop for even a few seconds, then all of the data would have become embedded into the laptop’s hard drive, making it appear as though she had been recruiting her classmates to join a Syrian terrorist cell. We are lucky the kid goes to an Ivy League school. Almost all her classmates are related to someone high up in the government. Senators, entrepreneurs, celebrities, all send their children to these schools. So, when one of them was approached, like Rifka, and asked to frame your sister, they didn’t blindly follow those depraved instructions and instead went to dad or mom.”

“You still don’t know who was trying to frame her?”

“We didn’t know right away,” Liam admitted. “But once we looped in to the university’s security cameras, we were able to identify the CIA imposters who recruited Rifka Brunstein. They were working freelance for a security firm in Toronto. But that firm was actually a shell company used by Bruno Grünewälder, the same guy who was trying to abduct your sister and ship her off to a sex-jihad camp in the Turkey-Syria border.”

“If Grünewälder wanted to frame my sister for ISIS terrorist activities, then why were the fake CIA men asking Rifka to plug in the same thumb drive into *all* of her classmates at the Ivy League university?”

“I am presuming it was done to cement your sister’s guilt. Once the device was plugged in the other students’ laptops, it would look as though an interactive recruiting was taking place. All the messages were designed in such a way as to show it originated from your sister’s laptop, but if the other kids’ computers were seized, it would show that they had been approached by an ISIS terrorist recruiter. That way, the case would be blown into an epic proportion and FBI or NSA would have taken your sister into custody for being an ISIS leader.”

“What is this obsession- of trying to frame a college freshman for terrorist activities?”

“Honestly, I don’t think Bruno Grünewälder is an unreasonable man. Yes, he tries to frame other people, but only because he has a compulsive disorder in which he can’t pick a wrapper off the floor without framing ten people for it. He was in charge of the operational department of Blacksand Security, which was dismantled by the United States government, so he had to make another group to replace it. Blacksand is the precursor to the terrorist organization he made in Iraq and Syria. Once he created this ISIS, he, being a cautious person, didn’t want law enforcement agencies to figure out what he had done. He really wanted the world to believe ISIS was a real terrorist organization. No one could know he had just recycled Blacksand and turned it into a Middle Eastern entity. And in order to convince Americans he didn’t make ISIS, this German dude has been making short films, TV shows and movies since 2010. In the past four years, I flagged at least two hundred movies he partially funded, directed and produced.”

“What kind of movies?”

“Various themes and genres. Action films, drama and war movies grossing millions. But eighty percent of the movies he produced are related to the terrorist group called ISIS. Those movies demonstrate how dangerous these Middle Eastern terrorists are, how they have infiltrated every city in the world, how they are carrying out bombings around the world and keep slaves for sex-jihad etc. The primary goal appears to be propaganda; Grünewälder is desperate to make viewers believe that ISIS is real and that it is a Middle Eastern group, and is not affiliated with either him or Blacksand.”

“During early 2000,” I informed Liam, “there had been numerous cases of movie producers being funded by an unidentified party. I myself investigated several of those and discovered that it was Cynthia’s stepfather who had paid several Hollywood directors to make films about snippets from his life, about Cynthia and also how the Twin Towers of NYC would get destroyed. He enjoys earning money through movie making. Mostly entertainment, some politics you know the same old blaming terrorists he created, but mostly just business.”

“Richard made movies propagating terrorism?” Liam asked.

“Not entirely. It is one of his many modes of earning cash. He gets profit from producing blockbusters. Eighty percent of Richard’s movies and TV shows are unrelated to terrorism. They are action-packed crime thrillers, drama or war films. He pays the producers to create the film and then pockets millions of dollars in profit.”

“Well, I guess Richard’s employers learned to make movies from him. We traced his bank transfers- it seems our framer, Grünewälder, also paid dozens of authors to write scripts and books about how real ISIS is, and how the Middle Eastern terrorists are taking over America. Ironically, he paid those writers to publish their books as non-fiction, so that readers would believe each word. Same with movies; most of the Hollywood blockbusters about ISIS and terrorists are dubbed as documentaries, although it didn’t contain a single syllable of fact.”

“What happened after the framing incident in college?” I asked. “Once you were alerted that my sister was being targeted?”

“We increased security, obviously. And this proved to be tactical, because less than a month after Rifka Brunstein foiled the fake ISIS plot, we observed several non-university affiliates in the community soup kitchen in Broadway. Your sister visits the local church every morning to volunteer at their pantry and kitchen where the pastors serve the homeless people of that area. We noticed the non-affiliates approaching the homeless people who had arrived to pick up food and clothing and take part in the free community dinner at the Presbyterian Church. Several of the poor folks were offered jobs. Our security team was on high alert so we approached those homeless people and asked them what the strangers wanted from them. One of them said he was asked to toss a small bomb into a police car. Another young homeless kid said the man who talked to her said he worked for a global enterprise called ISIS and he requested her to take a bomb and leave it at her school locker. All they asked in return was that she upload a post on her Facebook and twitter claiming Alla and Mohamet told her to do this. We didn’t need to hear any more to realize it was another frame job in the making so we alerted the local authorities and had those fake ISIS recruiters arrested. But this was the second time people who were associated to your sister were being targeted by the German man and his ISIS group.”

“The homeless guests were being recruited by Grünewälder’s men?”

“Not just ordinary vagrants,” Liam clarified. “We studied the church’s security feed. The fake ISIS recruiters approached only those men or women who your sister had served or spoke with. Ultimately, it was a frame job, executed crassly, again designed to make the authority believe your sister was a terrorist who was recruiting homeless people.”

“What did you do after this particular incident?”

“We shut them down,” Liam replied, staring fixedly into the distance. “Local FBI office was notified and they apprehended the men who were trying to recruit the poor folks. We, on the other hand, upgraded our security, and since then, the security team began to follow your sister everywhere on campus. We also had an understanding with the Public Safety officers. They were apprised of the extenuating circumstances and granted us access to the university surveillance cameras. Trouble brewed one day when your sister swiped in to have breakfast at the dining hall in the girls’ campus. My security team was nearby when they noticed a second girl enter behind her. They found it strange that the young woman who entered after her was wearing identical clothing, and even had the exact same backpack. I was notified of this right away, so I was able to tell them to keep an eye on both your sister and the body double. Meanwhile, I was glued to the security cameras of the central serving area of the dining hall. I noticed the other young woman who was wearing the same clothes as your sister was spending an unusually long time at the salad bar. Upon zooming the camera, I noticed that she was spraying something on the vegetables and food trays. I alerted campus security and advised them to take the woman in custody. They were very cooperative and recovered the large spray bottle from the culprit.”

“What was the woman spraying over the food trays?”

“Fatal doses of poison.” Liam replied.

“Poison!”

“Yeah, neither my security team nor the university’s public safety department had any clue why the woman was dressed up as your sister and was spraying poison over the food of the university dining hall. Campus security shut down the dining hall and cleared all the food trays, but it wasn’t soon enough. Around eleven students suffered from mild food poisoning due to exposure to the spray but we were able to coordinate with the FBI and secure an antidote.”

“That sounded serious.”

“We conducted superficial interrogation but the imposter woman was a pro, trained to resist interrogation. Unsurprisingly, she was not a university student either and stole another freshman’s ID card to swipe in the dining hall. The poisoning was a mystery but once Manhattan’s FBI office sent over their forensics team to investigate the matter, they were able to shed some light on what was happening.”

“And what did they find?”

“It was your sister’s pepper spray, which she carried in case of an emergency. The doppelgänger had managed to steal it from her back pack and replaced the content with a venomous solution. If we hadn’t seen her spraying the stuff over the food trays and intercepted that woman, she would have successfully poisoned the entire dining hall, causing hundreds of deaths. Your sister would have been suspected for the crime and taken to FBI custody.”

“Did you personally speak to the FBI agents in charge of this poisoning investigation?”

“Even better,” Liam said. “I went to the Bureau’s Manhattan office and inspected their security system. One of the Dutch forces who were guarding your sister discovered a strange signal emitting from the server room. When he checked it out, he found that the CCTV camera to a specific holding cell was looped to give a prerecorded image on the main display screen. It was a thirty second video of your sister sitting calmly inside the FBI holding cell.”

“Two FBI agents had been compromised. One admitted to tampering with the camera. He said he didn’t have a choice. His daughter was kidnapped and would have been killed if he didn’t do exactly what the kidnappers asked. The other senior agent said he had been injected with a specific dose of amphetamine and was at risk of having a heart attack if he wasn’t supplied with the antidote.”

“What was their job?” I asked. “The FBI agents?”

“One was ordered to manipulate the cameras and corrupt the feed. The senior agent was instructed to take your sister into custody for terrorism and lock her in the specific cell- the one where the cameras had been disabled.”

“Did they say why the camera was disabled?”

“The FBI agents claimed they didn’t know the specifics, but their blackmailer hinted that they were going to carry out unsanctioned activities in there. I was alarmed to hear that and ordered our security team to resume questioning the woman who was caught spraying poison over the food trays at your sister’s university. You would never believe what she confessed.”

I closed my eyes briefly before fixing a resigned look towards my friend. While working at the joint U.S. Central Intelligence Agency–National Security Agency program, Liam would often be in charge of conducting clandestine surveillance in hostile nations. His uncanny ability of discovering anomalies were extraordinary.

“At this point, Liam, I am not averse to believing the most farfetched story.” I admitted grudgingly.

“The woman said her only job was to frame your sister and ensure the FBI took her into custody, whereupon the two FBI agents who had been coerced into cooperating with them would escort her to the specific unsupervised cell. Once your sister was in that holding cell, five men would be waiting for her. Their job was to sexually assault her and make a number of sex videos and record the entire incident to deliver to the main boss. The team had been promised nearly a billion US dollars for carrying out this abominable act.”

“They were planning to assault her *inside* the FBI building?” I repeated, not wanting to believe such things could even be possible.

“Right under their noses,” Liam confirmed. “Since the cameras were looped, the agents observing the holding cell would be completely ignorant of what was transpiring inside the room when the poor kid arrived. And before you ask, the guy who hired this complex team and arranged for the men to be present in your sister’s cell to make those sex videos, well, he was Bruno Grünewälder. Positive confirmation.”

I tried to keep my breath steady, battling spasms of nausea. What Liam had told me was staggering; it was too much for me to bear. After so many years of living as an orphan, I had arrived in the United States feeling alone and abandoned when I met this Russian woman, who looked remarkably like my own mother. Her kind demeanor and generosity melted my heart and I soon began to consider her to be my second mother. She reminded me of home, of the love I have missed since my childhood and when the woman had children of her own, I felt they were my very own blood brothers.

My friend Liam was speaking again. “After the alert my team received from the CIA, that her classmates were recruited by one of the hired mercenaries to frame her, we carried out a background check on all of her colleagues and peers. What we found out was astonishing. In her current semester, there were at least fifteen special forces members who were all hired to attack and kidnap your sister.”

I asked. “How did those mercenaries or assassins get admitted into that Ivy League school?”

“We solved that mystery recently.” Liam Fleetwood answered somberly. “It seems that the president of the University was heavily threatened and blackmailed and was ultimately coerced into admitting those criminals into his university.”

“What did the blackmailer threaten the president with?”

“According to intercepted messages and emails, the university’s president was threatened with jail time, because they promised to frame him for terrorism. He was told to admit dozens of belligerents and former Mossad, CIA and even military intelligence officers. All of whom were in the payroll of the mercenary Richard had hired.”

“So, he understandably listened.” I concluded.

“Yes,” Liam said heavily. “But unfortunately, there was another old man. The dean of her college. He was around eighty-three years old, and was close to the young novice. He was also threatened, and we know this because we traced several distresses calls the old man made to the local authorities and nearly FBI field office.”

“Why did he contact the FBI?”

“He was reporting that several unidentified men had threatened him and ordered him to give them access to the college lounge and dorms, and to allow them to kidnap the young girl. But he was a tough old man, and did not fear them or their threats. He was warned not to contact the authorities, but he still did.”

“Did they take any revenge on the university dean?”

“Yes, unfortunately, he paid with his life for protecting your sister.” Liam said softly.

“How did he die?”

“He was killed in a hit and run. It was all planned. We even spoke to the young drunken man who was ordered to kill him.”

“Did those traffickers frame my sister for his murder?”

Liam shook his head. “No, they knew we were still alert and vigilant. My security team would have been able to get her released and freed from those false charges, but we later tracked his killer and saw that the drunken young fellow was hired by a man who used the same bank account as the man Richard had initially hired to kidnap and sell your sister to human traffickers.”

My thoughts had gone to my beloved family who was in danger. I missed them so much.

Oftentimes, I would go to my adopted mother’s home and try to forget all the horrors of my past and present. The Russian woman was my anchor; her children- my siblings. Now, as I stood in the shadows and listened to how Cynthia’s stepfather planned on destroying the life of my sister, my heart burned in helpless rage. I could not fathom how someone could be so cruel as to order hundreds of men to assault a little girl.

Liam softened his voice, and was speaking again. “You know, I want to be honest here. I don’t want to sound pessimistic at all, but there are some realities we must face, sooner or later.”

“What do you mean?”

"I mean that we can't keep this going forever. I don't think my security detail will last for long. Most of us are too old for field work, and too many of us died already. I don't know for how long we could manage to give this young nun security, especially against hundreds of powerful and manipulative enemies. They have billions of dollars and euros as back up and have way too many powerful people in their pockets. Did you know that the captain of at least three police precincts near her residence had been in Richard's payroll? Dozens of cops obey him in a questionless manner."

"Why are the authorities so afraid of Richard?"

"He has them in his pockets by various means. I heard from one of the police officers that was paid, that Richard's mercenaries threatened to frame a few cops in illegal shooting, especially staging false shooting of minorities on their body-camera. It would be the end of career for them. The police chief of another precinct was threatened with evidence of corruption and unjust killing and, they naturally obey his every command. If Richard asks those cops to hand your sister over to him after a false arrest, they will do just that."

I shook my head in helplessness. "Liam, I still cannot fathom why this young nun is suffering for me. Is it because she is the old woman's daughter, a woman I had hardly seen and met. This Russian woman was kind to me many years ago, but we are certainly not related. Why doesn't Richard understand that and leave them alone?"

"Life is never fair," Liam agreed.

"I do not even know this girl properly. I never talked to the Russian woman's daughter, yet she is suffering so terribly because I exist. I wonder when this danger will pass."

"As a friend, I will tell you, I am old, and so are my colleagues. How long do you think a bunch of old men can hold off these sadistic enthusiastic criminals who are adamant to kidnapping your sister? Richard made them believe they will become billionaires if they hand her over to him and sell this nun into an international sex-trafficking ring. He promised those pimps presidency, even kingdom of small countries in exchange for carrying out one vile act. I would say they have a lot of motive to attack your family. They think your sister holds the key to their kingdom."

"I don't know how to keep my family safe," I admitted hoarsely.

"How long do you think we can hold them off before they kill off every single one of us?"

"What are you suggesting that I do, Liam?"

"I cannot give any definitive answer, but I can tell you that it is important to take her away to someplace safe. Somewhere off the grid, so the pimps won't be able to find her. It is after all, your duty to protect your adopted sister."

"I know, I know."

"It is your duty to take them away from these dangerous pimps, because they are harming them because of you. If you don't take them away soon, I am afraid to say, not only will they all die, but so will we."

"I don't know what to do." I pleaded. "All I can think of, is that if you guys can't protect her, and my adopted mother's family, then who can? I don't even know when I will die, and then what will happen to them. Surely, only God can help her."

I thought of my mother- her daughter was being targeted by the sickest criminals in the world, only because I was somehow distantly related to them. It was ultimately my fault. I heaved my shoulders, the remaining strength seemed to be ebbing away from my body. I was drowning in absolute sorrow.

My friend Liam was still speaking but I was hearing only faintly as though in a trance.

"I know it's a lot for you to take, but I had to tell you."

"Tell me," I mumbled, disoriented.

"About the Egyptian ex-soldier."

"Forgive me, Liam, I think you lost me. You were saying?"

"I thought you should know about the third man Philippe's security service apprehended."

"Who is he?"

"Peter el-Geyoushi. A former soldier in the Egyptian Army, dishonorably discharged after found in possession of illegal narcotics."

"What else did Philippe's men find out about the drug dealer?"

"He said there were suspicious looking men loitering near your mother's residence and two of them were about to hijack your sister's car when his security intervened and took them into custody. After extensive interrogation, they admitted being hired by Peter el-Geyoushi. We tracked the man's location and found out he ran a high-end bar in Cairo and had several illegal side businesses going on, such as drug supplying and human trafficking."

"Their employer is a convicted criminal?" I inquired.

“El-Geyoushi was doing Bachelor of Military Sciences at the Egyptian Military Academy when he was convicted of drug possession and expelled. I personally spoke with the Academy's director, Major General el-Dimiri, who said this man was dishonorably discharged after fighting violently with his drill instructor. After the military dishonorably discharged him, el-Geyoushi became a boxer and participated in a handful of low-level street side fights. He partnered up with several other amateur fighters and began his drug business before taking up this new job.”

“New job?” I repeated. “They were ordered to abduct my sister?”

Liam nodded heavily. “I am afraid it was worse than mere abduction. The men we apprehended were all fighters and amateur boxers. We cloned their phones. They had strict instructions to abduct the young American girl, transport her to abandoned area near Breezy Point, where they had set up a temporary port.”

“The men who were apprehended- who exactly were they?”

“If you mean nationality,” Liam answered, “two of the street fighters were ethnic Brazilian, one was a former Japanese bodybuilder who was disqualified from a TV show after being accused of doping. Another man who attempted to kidnap your sister and nearly succeeded was a former mixed martial artist from Lithuania. It seems that Peter el-Geyoushi hired a diverse team of men to kidnap and assault your sister.”

“You interrogated them?”

“Yes, and we discovered a great deal about Peter's plot. The arrestees claimed that their employer would personally be present at the New York harbor along with thirty other boxers who were all hired to assault the kid sexually and tape the encounters. It was just like the other men we talked about. Richard hired him to the same sick job.”

“How could he? Hiring professional wrestlers to attack a little girl? Even adult men would balk in the face of such adversary.”

“Have you forgotten what Richard did to you back in 2000?” Liam reminded me. His voice was hoarse with pain. “I didn't forget, okay. I remember how many times he tried to kill you. He set up death traps for you left and right, but you just always had to overlook it. Always being soft and noble. Every time Richard leaked your identity to the crooks, you came right back on his lap. I mean, I understand why you had a soft spot for him. He was your Cynthia's daddy and you didn't want to hurt her feelings, but really, man, if someone tried to kill me that many times, I would have knocked him off the face of earth a long time ago.”

“Liam, I know Richard is a terrible person, but I never killed him even though I had the chance to do so because I didn't want Cynthia to know I was the man who took her father's life.”

“Richard wasn't even her father, was he? The bastard simply pretended to be her real father all these years to get comfortable. Does she know he killed her real father in order to gain total custody of her?”

“Cynthia knows.” I replied quietly. “She is aware Richard is her stepfather, but she believes he loves as his own daughter. And I showed Cynthia solid evidence that proves Richard killed her biological father, but somehow Richard managed to talk his way out of it. Cynthia forgave him.”

The former Special Collection Service officer looked stupefied. “What the hell did he say to her this time?”

“You know how Richard is. He told her the reason he killed her father was because he was suffering from cancer and was in constant pain, so he requested him to mercifully end his life so he could be in peace. Richard didn't deny killing her real father. He merely explained to her why he did it. And she bought his excuse. Again.”

“But you!” Liam blurted out. “You should have known better than to sleep with the snake or his daughter. Cynthia may be gullible but you let him walk all over you. He knew you were a soft target and that made him so bold. Richard knows he could attack every single member of your family and abduct them, pimp them out and even execute them and you'll let him be.”

“That's not true,” I began, but my friend cut me off.

“Look at what he is doing now!” Liam said dejectedly. “Richard is spending billions of dollars, probably liquidated all his saving, and found the one weakness you have- your adopted family. So, he targeted the Russian woman and her children and threw his energy behind the little girls he thinks to be your sister. The kid took vows to become a nun but that doesn't matter to him, does it? Your Cynthia's daddy want to take revenge on you for stealing away his girl so he hired dozens of criminals and street fighters, paid them million to abduct your little sister and sell her to sex trafficking rings in Eastern Europe and South America.”

“The fighters- why have they agreed to do such a despicable job?”

“Peter el-Geyoushi recruited his fellow fighters to attack your sister, probably because he trusted them enough to keep a secret or split cash evenly. Like the others, Richard had paid him and his friends 500,000 US dollars which amounts to around a million Egyptian Pound. They were promised more if they could supply enough dirty videos. I also ran background checks on the fighters. Some were former mixed martial arts fighters, but were disqualified from professional fighting after testing positive on routine drug tests. They were broke and jumped at the chance to earn millions.”

"I don't want to believe Richard is capable of hiring so many dangerous criminals to sexually assault my family," I said imploringly.

Liam looked defeated and when he answered, his voice was hard. "If I know anything about Richard, then I know what a sick vicious old man he is."

"He may have his flaws, but he told me he loved Cynthia." I continued. "And, Liam, I believe him. Richard would never do anything to hurt her."

"He is insane, man!" My friend blurted out. "On the outside, Richard might look and even act like an ordinary gentleman. He might even succeed in making believe he saves people. His old buddies from Stasi probably still believe he will come to their aid if they are ever in trouble. But no one realizes that under the polished exterior, the old man is a psycho, who is insane with hatred and vengeance."

"I think you are exaggerating. I've hardly seen Richard lose his self-control. If he gets anxious, it is because he worries too much about his daughter."

"Have you forgotten what happened back in 1999? Richard literally kidnapped your friend – the blond spec ops guy- and tortured him in front of you. Tell me if a normal person acts like that."

When I didn't reply, Liam continued. "Richard had his thugs torture your friend so you would give up the location of all your money. He knew it would hurt you the most to see your army buddy suffer an agonizing death in front of you and you not being able to do anything about it or save him. It would have killed you not being able to save him because you would know he was suffering because of you. You'd feel guilty. Richard loves to play these mind games."

"If he hated me so much, wouldn't he have tried to kill me." I reasoned.

"If he wanted you dead, he could've killed you a long time ago," Liam repeated, "so something tells me his endgame is to keep you alive."

"What are you talking about?" I exclaimed. "Richard sent nearly a hundred assassins after me. He uploaded an open contract on my head."

"Yeah, I know, but deep down, I think he is hesitating to actually pull the trigger because he feels it makes you win." The former Special Collection Service officer remarked. "His hatred and anger towards you won't abate by your demise. He wants to see you suffer. And the only way he thinks that would be possible is by targeting those who are close to you, especially family. The closest thing you had to a family was this Russian woman who you considered your adopted mother. Since this foster mom is nearly seventy now, I guess he thought she was too old to hurt. With high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease, the lady would not last too long anyway, so he targeted her youngest child. The girl."

"The Russian woman's daughter?" I shook my head. "I still don't understand why Richard would think she has anything to do with me?"

"All he knows is that she is the youngest female relative you got. He wants to torture her to hurt you."

"I can't believe this! I've never even met the girl, Liam. Until you showed me the file, I didn't know what she looked like. I knew the mother and the older boys, but have gotten out of touch for several years now. Why would Richard punish a random little girl in order to hurt me?"

"I can't pretend to understand why Richard does his sick s**t actions?"

"You know what I think? Sometimes, I like to imagine that all this is just an imagination. And there are no killers and sex traffickers after my family. I can't live if I think it's real. It is too preposterous to think Richard would go so far to try and hurt me."

Liam Fleetwood blinked cautiously. "For Richard, it is not nonsensical at all. You stole his daughter and took her away from him. He was obsessed with Cynthia- in a weird way- and warned you to back off many times. But you didn't budge."

"Hey, that's not fair," I protested. "Cynthia loved me. We were dating for years."

"I know that, but he doesn't." Liam reminded me. "Your Cynthia was living happily in a bubble with her stepfather, when you came along and wooed her away. In his twisted mind, he saw that you took his daughter to hurt him. Now he wants to take someone close to you- like the girl you consider your little sister- and make you feel the pain he had felt when he lost Cynthia. He's counting on your conscience and dreaming about the best way to cause you pain. And selling your sister off to hundreds of different sex rings to be assaulted and abused is his way of punishing you."

"It's sick!" I shouted.

"I know it is sadistic, but he thinks it's the only way to get back at you. Do you remember what he used to joke about when you worked at his black op group? I was still the NSA liaison so I would come across him a lot. Richard's favorite joke was to talk about how irrational and emotional you were. He always told us you would never make a good agent because your emotions get the better of

you. He said your sense of morality made you naïve and incompetent because you gave up everything if your loved ones were in danger. You compromised missions and entire operations to save just one person. Richard found this trait of yours both amusing and disgusting.”

What Liam was telling me was worse than any nightmare I had ever witnessed or imagined! It wasn’t normal for scores of men to agree to undertake such a dishonorable task. How could they be willing to abduct a young college student who had taken vows to become an Orthodox nun? How could they think of torturing her and forcing her into involuntary prostitution?

I was distraught. I felt powerless.

Unable to take the terrible news much longer, I prepared to say goodbye to my friend, but he pressed five penda flex file folder in my hand.

I inquired. “What are these?”

Liam Fleetwood spread his hands vaguely. “Just brief personality profiles and background info of several other men I tracked down. I didn’t have the resource to scour every inch of their lives but they all seem to be receiving large sums of money from Richard.”

“They are hitmen?”

“It’s a mixture of low-level drug dealers to sophisticated killers. Some are former military men, even decorated soldiers. A few had been dishonorably discharged. I even identified two political minded men in this pile. Lobbyists and bureaucrats. They are all on Richard’s payroll. One of them had connections with both the Odessa mafia clan and the Sicilian Mafia. He personally knows a handful of senators as well.”

“He is a threat to my family too?”

“In some ways, he is. The man profits from international drug trade and human trafficking but he could be what you categorize as a sleeper agent, but in this case, it’s sleeper pimp. There is no doubt he is after your sister and is probably cooking up plans to abduct her and sell her into sex slavery but his most active missions are targeted at the older girl.”

My brows furrowed slightly. “Which older girl?”

“The older sister; well, your sister’s cousin. The two girls are inseparable so it’s easy to confuse them to be sisters. But the older girl, who is actually a young woman, has been under attack recently. Twice, a truck drove into her car. She barely survived. One man hit teams constantly follow her to her work place and college. I didn’t want to believe it, but it really looks as though the cousin’s life is a lot more at risk than your sister.”

“The assailants are trying to kill her or abduct her?”

“The cousin?” Liam said. “No, we don’t think they are attempting kidnapping. It’s a kill job. Her work place had been deluged with killers. Assassins were found perching on the roof of her office building. She does charity works and organizes rallies on behalf of Amnesty International and the United Nations. It was inside the UN building that we captured one of the hitmen who was camouflaged as a doorman.”

“Why do you think there are so many people wanting to kill the cousin?”

“My hunch is the men who are trying to kidnap your little sister are afraid of the older girl. She is tough, goes to West Point, has friends in the military, is very outgoing, goes to shooting ranges and exudes extreme confidence. They are worried she might thwart their dirty plans and protect the younger cousin-sister. One of the men tried to run the cousin’s car over a bridge. I think he wanted to neutralize the risk factor. If he kidnaps the little girl, he doesn’t want the older cousin to come after him to investigate and retaliate.”

I tapped the malleable folder. “Everyone listed here tried to kill the cousin of my sister, is that it?”

Liam pursed his lips momentarily. “All the men in these files have tried to hurt your family in some way, but two of them seemed obsessed with killing the older cousin sister. One of them seemed very interested in networking, though. He made contact with several Russian crime syndicates and Canadian sex traffickers and offered them millions of dollars in advance so that they would agree to take an American girl in their custody and force her to work in the brothels and make sure she stayed alive and not kill herself. Do you want to know whose picture he mailed those gangs? Your little sister’s.”

“Why aren’t police apprehending him? He is promoting human trafficking!”

My friend blinked rapidly at my outburst. “I read a few intercepted communiqué- but not all of them. An Ethiopian human trafficking ring he contacted agreed to use the girl for commercial sexual exploitation. He was in regular contact with the Russian mafia and assured them he had already taken care of the smuggling part, by paying customs officials million to allow the package to cross the border into Russia. He seemed a little obsessed with hiring Russian traffickers to sell the girl into sex slavery but it seemed the Russian crime syndicate was reluctant to do business with him.”

“Even after he offered them so much money?”

“The Russian spokesman was resisting the idea of kidnapping an American nun who studies at a prestigious Ivy League college and forcing her into prostitution. They said their sex workers come voluntarily so they don’t need to torture anyone into submission. They

thought the risk of getting embroiled in an international incident was too high and simply wasn't worth it. In his responses, Richard's paid guy threatened use his contacts in the Governor's office as well as his friends in Quantico to shut down the Russian mafia's drug transportation business and illegal weapons trade if they didn't agree to take the package. However, the Canadian sex ring and the West African traffickers agreed to take the girl and force her into prostitution rings."

When Liam stopped speaking, I could scarcely blink. My eyes were burning in anguish.

But moments later, Liam began to talk about an Italian-American man named Bastico. He was an army admiral and had been serving in the United States Navy for decades.

"My colleagues at the NSA were concerned about this mercenary," Liam said.

"What did he do?" I asked absently.

"Bastico paid several Spanish high-ranking officials and ministers to allow him to make an ISIS base in Barcelona, but they did not agree. The Italian naval commander then built secret centers in Spain and funded ISIS from a variety of criminal activities such as extortion of civilian economies, smuggling oil, and mass robberies."

"How?"

"The Italian man also maintains stockpiles of hundreds of millions of dollars scattered across the Middle East and Africa, and he earned much of this money by looting Syrian businesses, Iraqi wealthy families, and also hijacking oil refineries."

"But it all stopped after Russian interfered, correct?" I asked.

Liam nodded. "Targeted counterterrorism operations and airstrikes by the Russian forces in Syria served to diminish critical financial networks of Bastico's mercenary group, but Richard supplied him with additional cash reserves, and he was then able to use ISIS's ability to exploit natural resources such as oil from the Middle East region."

"But the Russian army defeated Bastico's mercenaries and the ISIS," I insisted.

"What the Russian military accomplished in Syria and its borders was a territorial defeat of Project ISIS because it eliminated Richard's control of territory in Syria and reduced the Italian man's ability to generate financial assets," Liam explained patiently. "But what Interpol, and FSB do not understand is that the mercenary group which created ISIS continues to generate revenue from criminal activities through clandestine networks Europe, Central Asia and South America. Richard personally provides significant financial support to its network of global branches and affiliates."

"But ISIS was the brainchild of Bruno, the German criminal," I remembered.

"But this mercenary group has secret bases in Central and East Africa, as well as the Balkans and operates from several locations in Portugal and Spain. Recently, this Italian-American navy commander carried out several large-scale attacks on Spain."

"Why did he target Spain?" I asked Liam.

"It was for revenge. The navy commander regularly uses the Port of Cadiz Bay to dock his ships and bring in weapons delivery and even drug supplies from South America. On more than one occasion, the Spanish police intercepted his illegal shipments and arrested some of his men. Understandably, the Italian man became very angry at Spanish authorities and detonated several bombs in Spain. He hired Italian and German freelance operatives to blow up residential and commercial buildings in Barcelona, Madrid and Andalusia. Of course, Baldassarre Bastico framed those attacks on local Arab migrants and other Moslem men who were living in those Spanish cities."

"So, he is bombing these cities to scare away local Spanish authorities?" I inquired.

"Yes, and whenever the shipping ministry refuses to listen to him, he gives a few bombings in densely populated areas, like the one he did in Barcelona and Madrid, and frames innocent people for it."

"It sounds a lot like how the other man, Bruno Grünewälder, made the ISIS terror group in Syria and Iraq, hoping to make ISIS look worse than Nazis of Germany."

"That Bruno man was paid by Richard to make that group, is that not right?"

"Yes, Grünewälder made the ISIS project to open up a sex trafficking organization, and he even named all the sex-jihad camps strange names like *Naza Love camps*, after those Nazi military brothels the Germany Army liked to refer to as love camps," Liam sighed. "It is painful to think that Grünewälder went through all of this trouble to make an organization of sex slaves in order to hurt and kidnap your sister. He wanted everyone to think that it was natural if she got abducted."

"I don't understand why destroying my sister's life is so important to them?"

"Richard paid them millions, hundreds of millions of dollars to pimp her out. He promised them power, money, all in exchange for selling your sister to sex traffickers. Hurting you is that important to Richard," Liam said. "By making ISIS, Bruno Grünewälder wanted to make his old Nazi heroes look good by creating something that would seem far worse, like ISIS beheadings and sex slavery."

However, Bruno's friend, this Italian navy officer is different. He is creating all these mercenary groups such as the Taliban group in Afghanistan out of revenge. He wants to kill as many civilians in Afghanistan as he can."

"Why did they start this revolution now?"

"The Taliban takeover of Kabul coincided with the International Apostasy Day, which these ex-Moslems celebrate vigorously in Afghanistan."

"I know, but why did the Italian-American admiral decide to bring the Taliban back to power?" I asked again.

"He had the perfect opportunity, because the American forces were leaving quickly.

There was a very good reason why the American soldiers decided to pull back from Afghanistan."

I asked Liam. "What was the real reason?"

"For the past six months, the Italian mafia man was launching powerful rockets and energy bombs at the American servicemen who were in Afghanistan. Hundreds of soldiers were dying every day, and naturally, the ex-Moslems in the Taliban group claimed responsibility for the attacks. However, those attacks were actually given by Eastern European mercenaries who work for the Italian Admiral."

"Why would this Italian admiral bomb his own American troops?"

"He wanted to force the United States to withdraw from the Asian region, so that he could restore the Taliban in full power like he did in 1990, and then he planned to use the Taliban to launch a series of attacks on the United States and even the United Kingdom."

"He wants to attack the United States?"

"Yes." Liam nodded.

"But it is his country!" I exclaimed.

"Well, he does not believe so, because since he is from Italy, and would never attack his home country. However, the reason why Taliban forces speedily took over Afghanistan in a few weeks, was because the Italian man wanted to launch a very large-scale attack on several American cities very soon. His objective was to bomb several important places in America on the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks of 2001 in New York, and then make the Taliban claim responsibility for it, like they did back in 2001.

None of the Taliban leaders are Afghan Moslems. Most are ex-Moslems and Indian Hindu drug dealers, and Richard and his Italian friend hired those men to wear turban and select random villagers to oppress."

"The NSA already found out all this?" I asked incredulously.

"Photos taken by mercenaries were supplied to reporters, making it appear as though it came from legitimate Afghan journalist. Those video show that Taliban members are killing little children and burning women and old people." Liam told me. "He hired propaganda agencies, and ordered his men to wear Afghan clothes and make videos showing fake Taliban members dragging men accused of theft through the streets of the newly-captured cities like Herat and Kabul. In reality, those men who are dressed as terrorists are all members of the Lethal Unit."

"So, the videos and news we hear about this group of cutthroat terrorists are all actually Richard's men?"

"The Italian man and his German friend are constantly circulating images of men and women tarred in black ink with nooses around their necks being paraded through the streets as armed militants flank them. Some of the militants are pictured pulling at the nooses of those women and children, and they supply these videos to American and British media, and announce that they are doing these crimes because Alla and Mahomet told them to do it."

"Who are the actual criminals?"

"These men have been trained under the Italian naval officer and his German friend, and they used American-made sophisticated weapons to take over the entire country of Afghanistan in two weeks. And the entire world thinks that this mercenary group members are Taliban fighters."

"What kind of idiots will ever believe that villagers like the Taliban would be capable of destroying a whole country in one week? Even superman would not be able to do that." I shouted.

Liam answered softly. "People believe what the media tells them to believe. Richard and his Italian employee have targeted Afghanistan since 1980. They hired local war lords to fight against the Soviets and take the blame for all of his criminal activities. The Italian man's hackers and code breakers work all day to supply local and international media with false news, and upload videos of fake Taliban leaders claiming responsibility for various terrorist attacks."

"What is the Italian man's plan right now?" I asked.

"You are talking about Bastico? Well, both Bruno Grünewälder and his Italian friend are trying to recreate an original Taliban group with spiritual terrorist leader like Mola Omar, and this time, we believe they are planning to name the supreme leader of this mercenary group, Nabiin."

"What is Nabiin?" I asked again.

"This Italian man wants to make it look like the Moslem prophet has been reincarnated or resurrected from the dead, and this new prophet will be the leader of the Taliban and then order all of his followers to kill other Moslems."

"How many people is he planning to kill?" I asked.

Liam shook his head. "I don't know. But I will tell you one thing. This Italian guy reminds me of Nero."

"Who is Nero?"

"The Roman Emperor Nero, who burned up half of Rome, including his capital building in order to frame Christians for it. He was sick in the head, and even killed his own mother in 59 AD. Whenever I think about what this Italian admiral is doing, making Taliban, trying to seize Pakistan's nuclear weapons, and detonating it over the United States, and then framing Afghan villagers for it, I can swear that it is another Nero."

My mind was becoming numb. The wind was feeling very cold on my face. I noticed with shock that my cheeks were wet with tears. I hadn't realized I was weeping.

The morning's updates were too much for my heart to absorb.

My former NSA colleagues and friends at the Agency did not pass over any opportunity to remind me that the obstacles I was facing in life were my own doing. They insisted that my enemies relentlessly targeted me because I was too timid. Perhaps what they said were half true. I remember being in the Soviet training camp as a teenager. I had been the most hysterical recruit in the Camp, and the slightest provocation would make me insane with rage.

My trainer Mikhail would try to conceal my maniacal tendencies from the colonel. I recall tossing a large refrigerator off the roof of the five-story dorm building because some of the recruits made a fuss about not letting other boys store their food in the fridge. I had an argument and threatened to throw it to the ground floor if they didn't let everyone share. Since that incident, some of the recruits became wary of me and would try to avoid my presence.

Moving to America was a life changing event. I was fascinated by the fast-paced life and successfully integrated into the society as a sleeper agent, but even in my cover jobs, I had difficulty remaining calm in stressful situations. My college roommates would notice my erratic behavior and call me the crazy Russian. They found it odd that I often took unnecessary risks.

Once I joined League 13, my behavior changed somewhat. I worked tirelessly in the black op unit of the NSA in order to shut down the largest organized crime ring in the world- the Camp in which I had trained. On some days, I felt as though I would slip into insanity, and lose my bearings completely but then I met Cynthia, the soulful soft-spoken young woman who was only a few years older than me. Having her in my life changed my personality dramatically. My heart felt calm and I did not feel as passionately about my missions as before.

All I desired was to get away from the deceitful world of espionage and live with Cynthia. But I paid dearly for making that choice. Cynthia's father Richard, who was also my employer at the NSA, disapproved of our relationship and made his dislike very clear. He sent me on numerous doomed missions and would often alert the enemy party of my presence. When I got captured in Chile, North Korea or China, Richard would disavow any knowledge of my existence and would assure the State Department that he did not even know me. As a result, I would remain locked in their interrogation chambers with no hope or rescue or reprieve, gradually getting tortured to the brink of insanity.

Somehow, each time, I managed to escape or my old friends from the Soviet training camp would rescue me. But when I returned to the United States, instead of seething in anger and hatred, I would feel depressed and miserable. My heart did not desire to take revenge of Richard for hurting me, because I loved his daughter too much. Perhaps it was a weakness to love so intensely; it certainly diminished my fighting spirit.

I loved Cynthia and was prepared to go to any lengths to protect her and Richard used this to make me carry out more dangerous covert missions for him. He often hid Cynthia away and told me she had been abducted. My instructions were to retrieve certain object of high value or capture a formidable criminal in order to secure her release. I was a skilled spy and I should have seen through his manipulations but I couldn't see what was right in front of me. I trusted him with a restless desperation.

For years, Richard played with my emotions, even kidnapping and torturing me for several in order to brainwash into forgetting my real identity.

Had I been half as fierce as my Russian counterparts, maybe he wouldn't have played with my brains so often; maybe he wouldn't have tortured me with relish; maybe he wouldn't have hurt my family so meticulously. Maybe if I was a bit more bold, Richard would not have treated me like an animal. He freely used me like an animal, torturing, brainwashing, and manipulating me like a guinea pig.

I had risked my life for him hundreds of times trying to free him from unregistered prison sites and mercenary kidnappings. I braved impossible obstacles to retrieving intel, rare documents, secret hard drives and money for him because he convinced me it was the right thing to do. I used to break into the most secure bank vaults to steal incriminating information about him that his enemies were using to blackmail him. For years, he used my services to achieve unparalleled power. Each time he entrapped me in a dangerous city, I would return from the journey and come back to him because somewhere in my mind, I wanted to believe he loved me like his own son. I cannot recall how many times I saved him from his enemies when they sent professional hitman to assassinate him. I thought he was one of the good guys, but many years later, I discovered that the men who had come to kill him were exacting revenge for their loved ones Richard had personally executed or had tried to kill earlier.

Ah! Now I have no one to blame but myself for my own fate. I have brought it upon myself. I have led the path to my own destruction by being loyal to the one person who did not care for me.

It was I who continued a relationship with his daughter after noticing so many obvious warnings and understanding his disapproval. It was I who made him the most powerful man in the world. It was I who got the intel of his wife's whereabouts which led to her ultimate demise. It was I who seized untraceable currencies and intel from criminals and money launderers and handed it to him enthusiastically.

It was I who brought this destruction unto myself. I have no one to blame for my sins except my own self.

I consider it to be my fault alone. It was I who was blinded by gratitude. It was I who wanted to love him like a father, hoping that I would one day have the perfect family with Cynthia. It was my own human weaknesses which blinded me to the obvious.

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Just as I began to think life could not offer me anything worse, I received a call from the hospice.

It was the medical facility I had registered Dustin into. The woman in charge of the center said patient alpha was unresponsive. Minutes later, I received a second call. It was the local police department. They wanted me for questioning. I was a chief suspect into the murder of the patient who had just suffocated to death.

Perplexed, I phoned the private hospital. They confirmed that my dear friend Dustin was dead. The doctor on site ruled it a homicide.

My blood was pulsating painfully. I didn't know what to do, but I knew there was only one place in the world I needed to be right now. My friend Dustin had just died and I had to be there with him. I couldn't let him face death on his own. All these Dustin had my back, and now I needed to there for him.

Oh, how unfair it was for those people who live in the grave not to have any worries to think about. They don't feel any pain because they don't have to mourn the living relatives. I cried constantly thinking about them. Why am I having to bear the agonizing burden of grief and cry for them when there is no one to weep for me?

The people in the graves are so lucky to be able to leave this terrible world and live with God in peace. I am unfortunate to be suffering this life, mourning the friends who have tragically departed. Now, the only emotion I now feel is the pain of loss and despair. I wish I could pity the dead, but I find myself feeling sorry for being alive, for surviving, for feeling a vast emptiness inside my heart. My dear friends had left this world abandoning me to my cruel fate, leaving me desolate in a place where I never cease hurting or being tortured. It seems unfair to me even now. Why did my dear friends have to die leaving me to wallow in lonely sorrow? Why couldn't it be me in their place? Why did they love me only to leave me in the end? Why did they help me only to abandon me to my wretched fate? I have been condemned to carry unmeasured grief and sadness as I struggled to brave the human weakness within me. My tears would not falter in the sight of years, nor would it cease in the face of despair. My sole grief had lain in knowing I couldn't save those I loved, and one by one, they all died without any warning. Ah, how lucky were those souls who lay beneath cold tombs! They have no more miseries to feel, and have no more sorrow or gloom to brave. There is no unknown fate brandished over their deceased head. I cried in anguish as I stood by his grave, and while I wept, I could feel my spirit getting crushed under the momentous pain. I hoped God would soon save me from this world and all the terrors in it.

I bolted to my car and sped to the hospice. Two blocks around the medical building had been cordoned off. There were police on every corner. I knew this was a setup. Someone had killed Dustin and framed me for the murder. It was highly unusual for police

response to a suspected homicide to be so dramatic, but I suspected someone must have wanted to flush me out and alerted the cops I would try to come here to see my friend.

I tried every possible path to enter the complex, but the perimeter was airtight. I finally doubled back and attempted to enter the building on foot, but was sighted by two officers. They ordered me to stop but I knew if I was captured, CIA would take over from them and ship me off to a black site. But the police were covering me with their service weapons so I couldn't run. I waited with my hands behind my back. When one of the cops approached to cuff me, I knocked him off his feet and held him hostage and backed away to a waiting police van. I released the policeman, jumped into the van and barely escaped.

He was gone! The reality finally sunk in. It was too much for me that night. I had been on the run for over eight days, evading authorities and mercenaries alike, trying to save one dear friend from the cruel death that was looming threateningly over his head. Despite all my efforts, all my desperations, my friend was dead.

It was much too devastating a calamity for me to bear. With a great shudder, I crumbled to the floor, dissolving in tears. My face was covered in dust and grime. As the hot tears streamed down my face, leaving pale traces over my cheeks, my vision cleared slightly. I saw the flashing sirens heading to my location. With a jolt in my heart, I remembered that I was still a fugitive. Richard still kept up a manhunt on my back. Part of me wanted to sit on the very spot and remain in the position for the rest of my life but my instincts took over and I got to my feet and headed to one of the nearby alleyways. I was deluged with grief, but I sought privacy so I could mourn my friend in seclusion, away from the accusing stares of people who had no clue what betrayal I had experienced in my relatively short life and how much pain I had endured.

Dustin had supported me when everyone in the world turned against me. From my teenage years when I first set foot in the rogue KGB colonel's Camp, Dustin supported me even though he barely knew me. He was a year younger than me, himself a young boy, but he persevered in the harsh atmosphere of the training center and saved my life more times than I could count.

There was no one else to conduct the last rites for him. I had to do it! I had to bury my dearest friend.

I couldn't believe this body would disappear from the face of earth; this man who had deactivated hundreds of bombs, re-tasked dozens of satellites and enabled me complete my missions successfully and save so many people in the world; and now that he was gone, I was unable to give him a hero's farewell.

When Richard had threatened to detonate a nuclear reactor near Kremlin, it was my dear friend Dustin who personally dropped a jamming field over the capital city and prevented Richard from transmitting the kill order. He had been directly responsible for saving the lives of millions of Russian citizens and should have received the highest title of honor, yet at his death, there was no one to award him the Hero of the Russian Federation. Dustin had prevented hundreds of domestic terrorist attacks within the United States but he never got credit for it because we did not exist in the official American directory. We were not formal agents or law enforcement officers. Had Dustin been an officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, perhaps a small star would have been carved for him at CIA's Langley office but that was not to be. We were alone.

When it was time for the burial, it pained my heart terribly to know that I will have to drop his body in a dark hole. I clasped a handful of the dirt over his grave and could not stop crying. Dustin would live here forever. My dear friend would never be able to speak to me again.

It is the hardest thing in the world to bury your friends.

I hoped the god that he believed in takes care of him in this uncertain place.

January, 2016

"Hey, how are you?"

"I am doing well," I replied slowly, turning around to see who had spoken to me. "I did see you somewhere, but I can't remember where."

"I was the Cryptologic Cyber Planner at the NSA's black ops division. Used to work for Richard around the time you were his pet." The tall man offered me his hand to shake. "Name is Ted Collins."

"Nice to see you, Ted." I replied cordially. "What brings you here?"

“I am running an investigation,” Ted explained. “You see, after I left Richard’s division, the CIA and the FBI approached me and they said they suspected Richard was doing some things that were very illegal.”

“What kind of illegal things?” I asked, bewildered.

“Remember what Nazis did? Back in 1940?” Ted asked me. “They butchered gypsies, Russians, Slavs, and the Jews. In those days, Jews were like Arab terrorist in Germany, who had no right to exist. And this is what Austrian man did to our great nation.”

“When you say the Nazis were evil, what do you mean?” I asked.

Ted Collins answered patiently. “I mean they also went around framing people for crimes they never did.”

“Really?”

“Yes, at the beginning of World War Two, Adolf Hitler knew the majority of the German population did not want war so he hoped to persuade them by pulling off a false flag operation. The plot was centered on the Gleiwitz radio station, a German broadcasting station located near the border with Poland. In late August 1939, Hitler obtained a group of German convicts, and had them dressed in Polish army uniforms. These wretched men were then taken to the Gleiwitz radio station and machine-gunned to death. Their bodies were arranged around the radio station in such a way as to suggest that they had been shot while storming the building. Nazi agents inside the radio station then broke into the ongoing program to read a raving anti-German declaration in Polish, proclaiming that Polish forces had taken over Gleiwitz and the radio there. This crude farce, when amplified and repeated hundreds of times by Dr. Goebbels’ propaganda machinery, secured at least minimal acceptance by the German population of the inevitability of war, which broke out with Hitler’s attack on Poland, September 1, 1939.”

“That is terrible!” I remarked.

“It is,” Ted agreed. “German Nazis also framed Russian soldiers for a lot of crimes. They would always make propaganda videos which showed actors dressed in Russian uniforms, and they would create movies with those actors, showing how Russian officers smashed little children to the walls and ate babies. Those were films, but the German government would broadcast the videos and tell them it is live news reel. They lied terribly about Russians. And that is one reason why the German civilians were so afraid when Soviet forces took over Berlin. Now, Richard who is Austrian like Adolf Hitler, also took a nation like America and overnight made it like Nazi government. By using a handful of American senators, Richard succeeded in corrupting our democratic system. It would have been unimaginable that in the previous administrations, like at the time of President Reagan, President Carter or President Kennedy, American government officials and senators would sit in a room in congress, and officially and legally pass and enact laws that would condone waterboarding, imprisoning, torturing them, starving them, electrocuting them!”

“Indeed. That never made sense to me.”

The Cryptologic Cyber Planner at the NSA’s black ops division nodded. “The American government does not officially condone torture. That is not who we are. We are a free country that stands against torture. This is our greatness, but what did Richard make us? He fucked up the media. He fucked up people’s brains. He made people hate so much that- first he made them hate religion, and now you see what happened, once people start to hate someone for their faith, then the next thing they do is hate them for their race. Now those people, who had for twenty years, stored hatred in their hearts against Muslims, that they started to hate black Americans, or African Americans. Now, we see tensions forming that are akin to civil war. Within democrat and republican. Such strenuous relationship didn’t exist before. Before, the parties were superfluous, now everyone has extreme views, like Nazi Germany, either someone is SS or they are the few Germans who worked for the Allies. They have been turned into such polar opposites that there are no in between.”

“I see that.”

“I watched as he wrecked the entire American government before my very eyes,” Ted commented angrily. “You don’t know that he controls nearly hundred percent of the media.”

“How?”

“Through fake news.”

“But fake news is not possible,” I argued. “This is America.”

Ted Collins answered. “Yes, but he creates the fake news. For example, he makes one person kill another, and then take it to the media and instruct them to publish or air the news instantly. He had so much influence that he was able to contact every single global British news media and gave them millions of dollars to publish that news for him and when the journalists go to verify it, they see that the news is real. That is what he did with the ISIS terrorists’ network. He paid thousands of women to appear on media and give false interviews. I did my research and investigation. After Richard created ISIS and tried to use it to hide all his criminal activities, a handful of young Syrian youths volunteered to join it when they say what kind of creepy group it was. And those boys also wanted to overthrow Bashar because he killed a lot of their family members, and all three thousand of those young Syrian men were killed by Richard.”

“Why did he kill the young men?” I asked him.

“Because once they infiltrated ISIS, and they saw the depraved system of sex jihad camps, those kids said that it wasn’t right, because having sex slaves is against Islam and their culture, and their faith punishes anyone who does adultery, and slavery is also banned in their religion, and when the whole world accepted slavery as the norm, those young men said it was their faith alone that fought against the practice of slavery and began to abolish it. So since slavery was banned in their religion, they were trying to halt this the prostitution and sex ring within the bizarre group ISIS was, but Richard used his paid ISIS members to kill all 2700 men to cover his tracks and prevent them from exposing that ISIS wasn’t an Islamic or Arab group at all.”

“Who exactly killed those men?” I inquired again.

“He was a loyal employee of Richard, who had been working for him since 2006, and was responsible for murdering hundreds of Iraqi civilians.” The Cryptologic Cyber Planner replied. “He worked for CIA and NSA black ops, and he also killed a lot of mujahideen for them, and his primary work was to report all the ISIS members who were genuinely trying to fight for their freedom against the tyrannical Syrian government. He killed those Muslim men who tried to be recruited, because those men soon realized that killing babies, and forcing women to become prostitutes was not an Islamic thing. So, only the evil ones, the CIA operatives or *Blacksand* mercenaries remained in ISIS, those who would kill anyone for money and were loyal to Richard, and had no feelings for their own religion, country, or family.”

I shuddered in fear. “That agent of Richard, he really killed thousands of civilians?”

“You don’t know?” Ted asked me. “I thought you heard about him. He is famous. That man is well known as an ISIS commander.”

I blinked wearily and Ted continued to speak.

“I see you are looking worried. But trust me when I say this. The America you are seeing today is not the America I knew. The real America was very free. I know you are Russian and you people probably have an ingrained mindset about Americans and think that we are bad, but the truth is that America isn’t like that. Don’t ever think America is like that. All those black sites and torture sites you see, Richard convinced us to do it. He hands each one of his personal mercenaries twenty or thirty million dollars and tells them to go to Iraq or Afghanistan and frame a few villagers, or goat herders, then he blows up a car or something and pressures one or two senior officials at the intelligence agencies and asks them to hold those framed terrorists into blacksites.”

“But why would he do this?” I asked the NSA man.

The Cryptologic Cyber Planner at the NSA’s black ops division sighed before replying. “Because he wants to torture those Arabs or Muslims in these secret prisons. It is his desperate wish to start another holocaust. That is why he does that. Please don’t think for one moment that Americans are evil. We are not bad people. Some of us are just dumb. We are just too dumb to see through the lines, because we are straightforward people so when someone convinces us that someone is terrorist or some religion is a terror hub, then we become angry. We are not bad people. I hope Russians like you don’t think that all Americans are evil and sick perverts who like to torture or sexually assault prisoners. I know it’s asking a lot from you since you were tortured by the CIA, and had been in their black sites personally, but still, do not think we are cruel and that we torture everyone. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We, Americans, were misled, misinformed.”

“I know what Richard could do.” I confessed softly. “I used to work for him too.”

“Several decades ago, when I came to this section of NSA, I had different notions about America. I knew we lived by certain ideals, that our forefathers spelled out for us. But after seeing what happened in the past ten years, I cannot understand this America that I am seeing now. Everything changed in the last few years, and I myself can’t even recognize what I am seeing around me. Such horror, terror and hatred. The media which was spurned by Richard, was relentless, and we fell for it. Americans had become insane with hatred, thinking that every single Muslim in the world would kill them, blow up their house, slaughter their children and rape all the women, because that is what Richard’s media pawns were preaching and spreading lie about all these years. So, once some corrupt or naïve government officials legalized torture and secret wars and ghost prison sites, then the American public thought it was normal to be spiteful. The majority of the people became emotionally distraught and couldn’t understand that they were being fooled by the greatest manipulator the world had ever known. And not only was Richard shrewd, he was also very powerful. But right now, I am worried about what you might think. I know you got tortured at the hands of the CIA, but I hope you don’t judge all Americans by that ordeal.”

I shook my head vigorously. “I don’t, I really don’t think that way. I love all Americans. I always did. This is my country. I’ve known this land as my own home, as I have been here since I was eighteen years old. I don’t hate Americans at all. I know them. I was in Serbia during the Bosnian war and I fought alongside American peacekeeping soldiers, and I know what generous hearts they possess. Yes, a few may have had a big ego, but they all had soft hearts. I never think Americans are bad, no matter what the media says, and I know that Americans have been misled, misguided and misinformed. And they were sorely manipulated into hating the wrong people.

They have a certain passion in them and unfortunately it can be used against them. Please don't ever think I look down on your nation. I know Americans are good people. I always knew it."

"I am glad to hear that," Ted said. "You see how American political parties are nearly getting into civil war over petty differences. It is not because we have no manners or decency. It is because Richard had driven them crazy with his lies and manipulations, and made them become blind haters of religion, despise liberals like democrats, because they are afraid and manipulated."

"I believe that they were manipulated." I admitted quietly.

"We were not like that. We were once the greatest nation on earth, and now, every nation in the Middle East, when they hear our name, they think we are a bunch of sick pedophiles and sadist torturers. People in the Middle East hate us because they think we are waiting for another chance to go invade their nation and bomb schools and hospitals. They look at us as though all Americans are child killers."

"But wasn't America a democracy?"

"It is or was, but you need to remember that before World War Two, Germany was also a democracy, and they turned their country into a terrible place, and slowly ingrained the hatred for Jews into the nation and soon, the Gestapo and the Nazi special police like the SS began to arrest and execute people without warrants, and there were no laws to keep them under control. That is what Richard managed to do in the United States. By manipulating Americans and the government with fake news, Richard created a fascist system overnight and succeeded in taking away the privacy of every single people. He made the government organize a witch hunt and began to arrest anyone who looked Middle Eastern or Arab. He convinced the FBI to place double agents and spies in every single Muslim worship place, and also kept spies in churches and synagogues to monitor people. He ultimately made the idea of privacy disappear by making people become afraid of imaginary terrorists, and made the government to spy on Americans even when they were in their own homes. Richard was able to instill so much fear into the minds of American, that the people in this country became delirious with insanity and hatred and fear. To remove that fear, most people agreed to attack Iraq and Afghanistan, because Richard convinced them that by killing civilians there, they would be able to live in safety. That is how he had planned to use the American government invade or attack Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Iran, or Saudi Arabia. No Americans objected to his plans."

"But why did Richard want to attack all those countries in the first place?" I asked curiously.

"Because he wanted to profit from the wars," the Cryptologic Cyber Planner at the NSA's black ops division answered. "The Middle East has too much money, and Richard hoped to make America invade all those Muslim countries and steal away all their money and seize all their resources. And of course, he needed a pretext to do that, so he created a fictional terrorist group called Al-Qaeda, but soon, people started to suspect that Al-Qaeda was a fake group and also, the administration wasn't interested in starting another war. But then when the new administration came into power, Richard had this brilliant idea. He made a group, just like he made Al-Qaeda, but he named this group Islamic State. Do you know why he named it IS?"

"I have no idea."

Ted nodded curtly. "Because he knew, this way, he could get every single Muslim nation in the world look like terrorist and he could make the United States government attack all those Muslim nations. According to Richard, Islamic State was any country in the world, where they had a Muslim majority. He wanted to use that group as a frontier for all his violent activities and at the same time, make it appear as though Muslims are doing it. He wanted to attack all the Muslim nations in the world, and destroy their country and kill or attack any government in Europe that does not listen to him, whenever he threatens those government to listen to his ideas or suggestion. If those European nations didn't agree to be blackmailed, or threatened, then Richard would simply blow up a church in Paris, or a Mosque in New Zealand, or a shopping mall in Moscow, or some bar in America and then blame the attack on ISIS, or the fictional Islamic State he created."

"But why would he want to do that?" I persisted.

"Because then, he would win both ways," Ted Collins replied. "The European government would become very scared and listen to everything he said in the future thinking he is ISIS, and also, they would try to take revenge for the terrorist attack and invade those nations that claimed responsibility for the explosion and then kill or bomb those Muslim countries, because it would make him very happy."

"Why would that make Richard so happy?"

"Because he would be able to steal oil and other natural resources from the Gulf nations. Did you ever wonder why Richard framed so many Saudi Arabian young men during the September 11, 2001 attack in New York? It is because he had intentions to convince the American government to invade Saudi Arabia right away. In 2002, Richard was sure he would be able to attack Saudi Arabia but even though he framed the young Arab men so well, Richard underestimated the US government. And soon, some of the senators began to investigate the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and they concluded that the 9/11 terror assault was a false-flag war

provocation, carried out from inside the US federal government by a private rogue network which may have been controlled by Wall Street and the City of London, but they did not know for sure that it was Richard who was behind it all. This war provocation was executed by an extensive apparatus which included the patsies who were identified and demonized by the FBI and the mass media, the moles who served the rogue network inside government institutions, and shadowy technicians who actually produced the tragic effects observed. The main aspects of 9/11 were orchestrated through legally approved drills and war games, which were transformed, re-directed, and taken live by small cadres of rogue network loyalists. The overall command center is likely to have been located in an elaborate war room in a private military facility. Richard made sure the events of September 11, 2001 took place in a media environment of the most extreme mass manipulation and mass brainwashing.”

I put forth my question. “How come Richard did not succeed in invading Saudi Arabia if that was his plan all along?”

Ted paused before speaking. “Fortunately, the majority of American businessmen had tremendously good relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and they knew the royal family members personally very well. So even though Richard tried very hard to make them invade the gulf nation, the government didn’t agree. The businessmen said a country like Saudi Arabia, who supplies America with millions of dollars’ worth of crude oil for free, it would be politically and economically unwise to invade them. Because if America attacked Saudi Arabia, the Russian Federation would then join in an alliance with them and purchase their oil. And if Russia and China bought all their oil supplies from Saudi Arabia, then America would never be able to become successful again. But Richard definitely wanted to take all the oil and natural resources that Saudi Arabia had. Only because of the close relationship and business dealing between Saudi Arabia and the American businessmen, Richard was not successful in making the Congress approve the invasion plan of Riyadh. Had Richard been able to get his way, we would lose our greatest ally, who had for fifty years, supplied America generously with oil, selling it to us cheaper than water. And additionally, Saudi Arabia remained loyal to the United States, and never resorted to do transactions with the Russians or the Chinese. They maintained this friendship loyally and lovingly. So obviously Richard was disappointed, but he did not wait for long and went ahead to make the ISIS group, or the Islamic state, and make it do the most un-Islamic things so that people around the world would despise them, hate them, vilify them and make them do everything against what their religion teaches. Richard is a former Nazi soldier, and so he has an innate hatred towards Middle Easterners, both Arabs and Israelis.”

“It was such a twisted idea for Richard to create ISIS terrorist group,” I remarked sadly.

“Richard already did it once,” Ted told me. “He made Al-Qaeda and now decided to make a group called Islamic, and he would make fake terrorist pose in videos, and pretend to be Muslims while he ordered them to do terrible crimes on camera to broadcast to the world, and Richard then hired famous media outlets, like the British Broadcasting Company to publish that fake news.”

I asked quickly. “Why would famous radio broadcasters publish fake news?”

“Richard paid them millions of dollars, and they happily printed and filled all their front pages with that false news. Richard was determined to make Sharia law look like a criminal ideology, even though all of the laws ISIS terror network publicized are against Sharia and Islamic law, but of course people didn’t know that. They thought what they were seeing in ISIS was real and they believed Islam was a violent religion. No one bothered to search and find out, because they trusted their media. Why did Richard go through all that trouble to do this? Because it was so much easier to preach hatred and earn money out of the hate, and eventually rule other governments through fear.”

“That is a dreadful way to gain money and power,” I commented.

“It is,” Ted Collins agreed with me. “But can you imagine what Richard would have done, if he was able to keep that US Administration in power for another eight years? The same president who invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. He would have most assuredly made the Congress declare war on much more countries than Nazi Germany did. And he would have succeeded in killing a lot more Muslims than the number of Jews that German Nazis had murdered. And Richard would have done all that only to get money, to earn a lavish lifestyle.”

“Did Nazi Germans kill Jews because of money?”

“Yes, in those days, all the Jews were very wealthy, and they were bankers and entrepreneurs. That is why Germans killed them in millions, and seized away all their wealth, before gassing them to death in concentration camps. They also killed millions of Russians because they wanted to steal the vast oil fields near the Volga river. But now, Richard has a new target. He wanted to steal all of the oil in the Middle East,” Ted sighed. “What a disgusting man Richard is! I hate him so much.”

“I can understand your emotions, Ted,” I said. “I hate him too.”

“Oh, no, pal,” Ted shouted. “I hate Richard a lot more than you hate him. He destroyed my image, the grandeur image of my nation. He destroyed the real America, and took away the glamour that George Washington and Abraham Lincoln instilled in America. We were the greatest nation in the world. Richard and his greedy and psychopathic and sick agents and mercenaries, who would kill

anyone, frame anyone to gain a little bit power over the American government or to gain one extra dollar. They are so insane for money, that they will kill followers of any religion, frame any faith, and they will constantly manipulate everyone just to put some money in their pocket. They don't care how bad American looks to people around the world. They don't care if American citizens lose all their freedom, and they certainly don't care if our society breaks down into pieces and Republicans and Democrats fight with each other all the time. All they care about is to have some political power and position, and some cash in their pocket. That is what Richard and his Blacksand mercenaries and agents are like. And you tell me you hate him? Well, buddy, you have no idea how much I hate him! You have no idea how much Americans would hate him if they knew how much he used our country for the last thirty years."

"Last thirty years?" I repeated, thoroughly confused.

"Did you know that in the 1980s, Richard made several of his former Nazi friends infiltrate into the American Senate?"

"Really?"

"Yes, it is a fact. I have seen it myself. Your old employer had these senators in his pocket since 1980. He would make them lobby for his cause and get all his dirty work done by them."

"How could one man cause so much damage to a great nation like America?" I asked my friend.

The Cryptologic Cyber Planner at the NSA's black ops division answered calmly. "You see, the problem is that we are straightforward people. Americans are simple minded and we don't like to twist our words. Most of the American people are just a bunch of cowboys with a good heart. When people manipulate or trick us, we just are not able to understand that they are manipulating us. When someone tells us, hey, that religion is your enemy, and all its adherents are going to try to kill you, then we automatically want to go pout to their nation and kill them. The way most Americans think is that, hey, those Arabs want to kill our civilians, so we are just going to go and kill a bunch of their civilians. Americans believe that the civilians in the Middle East are terrorists. But we don't mean bad, truly. We are not cruel. Americans are not cruel like Nazis. And now when I think about Nazis, I wonder if they were really so cruel, or maybe they were victims like us. Maybe they were being used like Americans and tricked into hating the innocent people. Who knows? Maybe they were manipulated and fucked up in the head like us. If the American government didn't change in 2008, at least twenty other Muslim nations would have been attacked. And hundreds of millions of them would have died. Richard would by then have become multi-billionaire by taking all the oil money from Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman and filling his butt pocket with the cash."

I wondered aloud. "Would he go so far for some money?"

"I will tell you this, that Richard is an intricate planner, so he chose his words carefully when creating the ISIS terror network. He also chose a leader for the terrorist group and named it the Kalif, so most people who heard it, would think it represents the whole Islamic world. What a twisted way to take the Arab's money, which we were receiving for free anyway. We had their support for free. We had their oil for free. Now after what Richard did, Russia would be able to turn them against us, because now all Arab leaders think we are killers. They believe that Americans are civilian killers and Guantanamo Bay prison torturers. The sacrifice of those American soldiers who gave their lives since the day our country was born three-hundred years ago, are all gone to waste, because now, when the Arabs see us, when they look at American soldiers and CIA officers, all they think is that we are going to kidnap them and sexually torture them in black sites, because that is how they think all Americans are. Thanks to this old fucker, this twisted manipulator, the Arabs are never going to love us like before. The American people were mind fucked by Richard and his private security contractors."

"Yes, I know, that is why I hate Richard," I pleaded with my American friend.

Ted interrupted me coldly. "You claim to hate him, but that is not true. It is because of you that Richard was able to destroy our country. Insult and degrade my nation."

"How is it my fault?" I asked him.

"Because you were too soft on him, and despite having numerous opportunities to kill him, you always let him go."

"Well, Richard was my girlfriend's dad," I protested weakly. "I was afraid to kill him."

"He got this far because you let him," Ted repeated. "You had so many chances to silence him, but you never took those chances. You were trying to be grateful to him, and so you decided you were never going to shoot him, no matter what he did to you. Since you didn't want to kill him, today, millions of innocent people died because of the terrible crimes Richard did. I am sorry to say, but it is all on you. If only you had killed him when you were young, when he was still powerless, then so many bad things would not have happened in the world. I hate him the most in the world, but recently, when I saw what he was doing in China, I was a little happy."

"Richard did what in China?" I inquired.

"When Richard began to use his private contractors to make huge concentration camps in the Xinjiang region in China, and started to kill millions of Muslims, using the Chinese government as a front, I was happy because at least, he wasn't making Americans do that killing, and this time, American wasn't the bad guy killing innocent Muslims. This time, it was not America using drones to bomb innocent civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. For once, America was able to be the real America, for a day or two, and live like regular

human beings, because Richard was so busy killing Muslims in China, that he temporarily stopped bombing churches and airports in the United States. At least he is satisfied in China, where he already killed one million Uyghur and ethnic Chinese Muslims in those huge concentration camps. He ordered his mercenaries to torture the men, women and children to death and he also forcibly made another million sterile so they can't have children in the future, like the same way Nazi government did in Germany during the second world war. I heard Richard is building another twenty extermination camps in China with his own money, using his special forces and European mercenaries, who give funding and training to the Chinese government's forces. Even so, I am still pleased that he is busy making Chinese government kill innocent Muslims rather than making Americans kill civilians. Since the Chinese government is naturally a communist regime, he is finding it easier to control it and turn it into a Nazi replica."

"Killing any people is bad," I protested. "We shouldn't be happy about it."

"You are right," Ted agreed. "Because the moment I think that Richard might convince China to invade the United States, then they will start putting American citizens into concentration camps like Uyghur Muslims, then I don't feel too happy, but for now, I am relaxed that his sick mind is occupied elsewhere. All I am saying is that he would have made America invade at least twenty other countries by 2012 if he could, but again, some American people are so great that despite portraying Arabs and their religion as the worst thing in the world, and painting the greatest religion which for fourteen hundred years, did not commit a single act of violence or massacre, and Richard painted it as the sickest faith in the world, and even after murdering thousands of Americans on American soil and framing the Arabs and Muslims for it, most Americans eventually didn't agree to kill any more civilians by invading any other country after Afghanistan and Iraq. They didn't let the government murder any more innocent people like Germany. Because this country is full of people who have so much love and forgiveness in their hearts. But they are occasionally overshadowed by the passion of some. Yes, there will be a lot of Americans who passionately hate Arabs and Middle Easterners, but only because they are loyal to their country. It is because they think that every single person who follow that faith is the worst human in the world, because they were convinced for the last thirty goddamn years to hate them. To the point that for the last fifteen years, American government was forced to kill thousands of civilians of that religion. But even then, Americans didn't allow the number of victims to reach millions like Nazi Germany. Finally, we kicked Richard out of the country, but he decided to go somewhere else and continue the bloodshed. But before going to China, Richard did try to create ISIS and attempt to start another batch of wars, by making a biggest cult group in the world and portray it as the creepiest religion in the world and tried to convince the media that the people of that faith were inherently evil. Everyone almost believed that one billion people of that religion was going to attack and kill everyone else around them. His plan was to use ISIS to attack all western countries including Paris, Berlin, London, Madrid, Ukraine, Russia, the United States and Canada."

"Why would he want to invade all these countries?"

"To control the governments. It was his master plan but thanks to the Russian forces who began to land in Syria and strategically dismantled ISIS and killed and arrested many of Richard's paid agents who were pretending to be terrorists, Richard had to give up his plans for the time being. But knowing him, I am sure he will try to make another group soon. Maybe, he will use a country this time. I is possible he might try to use a country and overthrow its legitimate government and use that nation to kill the whole world, and then to make all other nation attack it in return. Maybe it will be Iran. We never know. Maybe Pakistan. Who knows? But for now, it looks as though Richard might be planning to use China as his endgame."

"Do you think he would really be able to do that?" I asked. "Richard is an old Austrian man who fought in the second world war, but is he smart enough for this?"

"I think so," Ted replied. "Imagine how he distorted the image of Arabs and their religion. For fourteen hundred, a religion that did not commit a single crime and did not kill any civilians even when they had a lot of power, and reigned over Europe for seven hundred years without committing bloodshed, Richard was able to portray them as the most violent religion in the world and made everyone hate them so much that now, five billion people are now ready to kill them. Ninety percent of the movies that are circulated in the French media, the Spanish media, the Australian media, the British and American media are created and produced by Richard's propaganda specialists who are constantly making fake news and movies that spread hate. He spends money generously and happily pay millions of dollars to produce a single film. And when it hits box office, Richard pockets all the profits."

"How do you know for certain he pays for those movies?"

"Because we trace it ourselves. The CIA keeps track of the money the film producers receive and they are taken from one of Richard's Blacksand account. This is how he used the media, and fake news, and blackmailed senators, threatened and convinced some CIA leaders to make black sites, and supplied them with fake terrorists who were either coerced or paid to make confession videos. The main leaders of those fake terrorist organizations were Blacksand operatives who dressed as Muslims and pretended to be great terrorists in ISIS videos. Those men were sick characters who were happy to sell off their own parents for a few dollars. Some were Arab Christians and ex-Muslims who hated their former religions while others were just poor peasants who wanted to make some money and

agreed to make the videos for Richard and made sure to use the right Arabic phrases in order to make the terrorist group look legitimate. He hired a lot of Arab Christians to put in those Islamic terminology that would somehow make ISIS look natural, and make it sound like there was a Caliph Baghdadi in their leadership position. It was his masterplan the day Al-Qaeda got down, and Richard wasted no time to activate ISIS, making regular shitty videos from time to time.”

“Why is Richard killing innocents in Yemen?”

“That is purely because he wanted to take all of Saudi Arabia’s money. And he also tried to overthrow the Syrian government because he wanted to attack other Middle Eastern countries using Syria as a cover. He lost his mind when he realized he no longer had full control over the American government in around 2009 and 2010, when the new Administration came into power. The government quickly executed the fake Ben-Laden man, and they realized all the nasty videos Richard published from time to time were also fake. Richard really thought he could make America like China, and make us build concentration camps like the Chinese, but he couldn’t. Although he used FBI to harass US citizens, especially after September 11, when the FBI began to grab anyone off the street without a warrant. I think Richard wanted the American police to become like the German Gestapo police, but we fought back for our freedom and kicked him out. And now he is in China. I don’t have any problem with that. Let him kill Chinese Muslims, as long as he does not try to attack America. We suffered enough from him. He used our government to earn money illegally. Richard used the American government to incite the Arab Spring and then use us to attack Libya so that he could capture and torture the Libyan leader Gaddafi and take away two hundred billion dollars from him and seize all his black money. Then he used that money to make the terrorist group we know as ISIS, and then Richard used ISIS to terrorize the American government and in return, making the American government to kill them again. He didn’t just stop there. He used ISIS to attack Saudi Arabia and take away all their oil money so he could stuff some more cash in his ass pocket. One sick psycho man like him can destroy the world. He started all this by killing Americans inside America and framing Middle Eastern kids for it, and then making us invade those countries.”

“I don’t understand why the American military carried out so many drone strikes against ISIS, if it was a fake organization.” I objected.

Ted Collins frowned darkly. “Good question. For several years, Richard fed false intel to the Pentagon and told them to carry out drone strikes against particular local targets in Iraq and Syria. Because there were some locals in those places who found out ISIS was a fake terrorist group who only killed Arabs and was controlled by European mercenaries. Any local who found out about what ISIS really was and how Richard made this group to pocket money would be immediately bombed by Richard. He hired a team of skilled mercenaries to constantly frame local Arab villagers for random bombings and hand the false evidence to the American military so they could strike them down. I am sure you are not surprised to hear this, because you were a victim of Richard’s framing many times, right?”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Richard and his men are the best framers you will ever meet, and when they frame someone for a crime, they don’t only frame you, they publish it in the news and they also make movies about it. This way, they are able to portray the victim as the worst person in the world. This is the reason why American cowboy government was unable to catch up with his tricks. Some of the members in Congress were in his payroll, but the majority of our lawmakers sincerely believed that Arabs are bad. Otherwise, it is unthinkable to imagine that the lawmakers would sit in the American senate, one of the holiest places in the country where we sit down and free people and where American leaders freed Afghans from the Soviets and helped Bosnians against Serbians, and assisted all the oppressed people around the world by sending American peacekeepers, and suddenly Richard made us killer and made those senators sit on those Senate seats and pass laws that would legalize torture and abuse. He convinced us and manipulated us into becoming killers. He played with our minds and used our passions against us. He made us kill the people he hated, the religion he hated.”

I spoke up. “But he always hated Russia. It was his target.”

“True, but Russia was a superpower.” Ted Collins explained. “He would have played this trick with Russia, but Richard knew Russia was way too powerful. He knew he needed a lot of money to attack Russia so he chose to take care of Middle East first. In his attack list, the Russian Federation comes second. But since it is the most powerful nation in the world, Richard needed money to face them. He needed a religion to use, and earn money from preaching hate. He is doing the same shit in China. The old man finally got his wish of putting Muslims in concentration camp, and killing millions at a time. Well, I don’t have any problems with that as long as he keeps his sick agents out of America. As long as he doesn’t kill our civilians and frame the wrong people and make us hate the wrong people and kill the wrong people. I don’t mind him using China to kill Muslims as long as keeps his dirty ass out of America. He finally got his wish of torturing children, raping women, and killing men and keeping it all a secret like the Nazis. His problem was he either had to kill Jews or Muslims constantly and now he can be in peace in China. Do you remember what Richard did in Spain?”

“No. What did he do?”

“Blacksand had a contract with Spain’s interior ministry but twice, Spain rejected his contract and within a month, Richard gave three bombings in Madrid framing ISIS, and one of the train station attack was framed on Basque separatists. After that incident, the Spanish interior minister immediately gave Richard access to their previous arrangements.”

“All this happened in Spain?”

“Yes, it sure did.” Ted Collins said. “He chose Spain because it is adjacent to Europe and does not have too many CIA officers there who could meddle into Blacksand affairs. There was no major AI, satellite, BND, CIA or the mafia like Italy. That is why Richard wanted to cut several hundred million dollars deal with businesses there. But as soon as they government hesitated to do business with him, he gave several careful bombings there to scare them off.”

“When did this happen?”

“Approximately five years ago. Sometime around 2014. I was there myself, along with some other CIA officers to investigate the attacks and we discovered that it was a frame job. I was there initially to investigate the illegal wire transfers of large amount of money with the Spanish Royal family but things went haywire once they rejected Richard’s offer. This is how he controls all of Europe, including France and Germany. He gives a bombing in the name of ISIS, and thus terrorizes them. He always makes his enemies become your enemies.”

“Yes. I remember how he did that to me as well. I was once about to get killed by an American ex-soldier, who was desperately trying to shoot me, but then one day, the FBI arrested him, and asked him why he was trying to shoot me so desperately and the man told the FBI he was taking revenge on me for killing his wife and children. I swear I never killed anyone’s children or wife, but I later found out that Richard killed that American soldier’s wife and children and framed me for it. He also confirmed it through the FBI, and later, that man apologized to me, but you are right, Richard is capable of doing a lot of terrible things.”

“Yeah, Richard always makes his enemies your enemy.”

I nodded slowly. “I remember few years ago, another man was trying desperately to kill me. He was a top NSA black ops agent and was very loyal to Richard. He was one of the main torturers who had me tortured in 1995, and made rats eat the flesh and muscle of my hand. So, when he came to kill me, Richard thought I would kill him in self-defense, but one thing I swore in my life, I swore on my mother’s grave, was that I would never kill anyone for personal revenge. Richard wanted me to kill that assassin because he was his enemy too. But I swore never to kill civilians. It was many weeks later that I figured out that the reason that man was trying to kill me was because Richard had craftily framed me yet again. He always does that, and tried to make me take care of his enemies for him.”

“Listen,” the Cryptologic Cyber Planner at the NSA’s black ops division looked at me and spoke abruptly. “It makes me feel terrible to think that our roles were reversed a few years ago.”

“What do you mean?” I asked Ted.

“I mean, you are Russian, right?” Ted said impatiently. “We, Americans, and even the European people, we all thought Russians were cold and harsh people. We all believed that you guys were still killers like the Soviets in Stalin-era, and that you would kill millions of your own citizens. But now, Americans are hated like Russians. Because of one Austrian man’s manipulations and trickeries, our government ended up becoming more violent than Russians. Now, it is legal in America to torture civilians in secret prisons, but Russia don’t do these terrible and cruel things these days. It is the opposite now. People think your country is the good guy while my country is seen as a villain around the world.”

“I am sure some people in the world know that Americans are still freedom loving good people,” I consoled my American friend.

But Ted Collins shook his head. “No, man, I don’t know about Russians like you, but even if you guys are still bad, people are going to think all Russians are good, because your country didn’t make Guantanamo Bay torture centers; your country didn’t go around invading Iraq and bomb civilians. I wish America didn’t look so bad.”

“I am sure a lot of people understand that. They know America has more good in it than bad.”

Ted Collins looked uncertain. “Do they? Sometimes I wish people knew that all the shitty things that are associated with America are actually alien to our culture. But we can’t go around telling other nations that a former Nazi dude messed up my country. I guess it is the same way we can’t announce to the world that the attacks on September 11, 2001 was not carried out by a bunch of Middle Eastern teenagers. It will be too dangerous for us to expose Richard and tell the people that one Austrian guy was behind it. The citizens of Europe have to believe Arabs were behind this, otherwise it would cause too much chaos and America’s reputation would be damaged beyond repair.”

“But the truth needs to be told at one point, don’t you think?” I suggested hesitantly.

“Not if it hurts innocent people. Look, you know this better than anyone. What about the predawn blasts on those Russian apartment buildings in September of 1999? Are you going to announce to the Russian state media that the bombings were carried out by Richard? Because if you do, it’ll take our countries back to the World War era. Exposing everything to everyone is not always the wisest

course of action. And as an American, I still think there are some Russians in your country who are crazed and murderous, just like Stalin who committed hundreds of war crimes and executed millions. But that doesn't mean the apartment explosions were carried out by Russian, but people will never know that."

"I wish we could tell them the truth," I sighed.

"We can't," the NSA's Cryptologic Cyber Planner said simply. "The same way we can't tell anyone who was really responsible for creating ISIS. We will have to make sure Americans and Europeans believe that the terrorist group was made by Iraqi and Syrians. They can never be allowed to find out that a group of sick European and American mercenaries banded together to create the group in order to carry out false flag operations."

"Something I still don't understand is why Richard worked so hard in making this weird terrorist network called ISIS? Was it really necessary?"

"Richard was primarily preoccupied with earning as much money in as little time as possible, and so ISIS suited him. He made the fake terrorist organization look as bloody as he could, and the scores of CIA officers and NSA operatives he had hired to make ISIS, actually though they were working for Uncle Sam. It is something American law enforcement often does- make agents pose as criminals, in order to fish out real criminals."

"Trained CIA officers should have realized that creating a terrorist network like ISIS was not government sanctioned." I stated.

"It's possible those agents thought they were doing a huge service to the country by helping Richard, especially because the old man had the audacity to pretend to be an NSA chief. But this is one of the set back of the American intelligence network. It is loosely intertwined, and each operative has agency over their activities and occasionally mission. This is great in some ways because if someone takes over Washington D.C. and passes martial law, there will be thousands of independent CIA officers working on their own to protect and free America but this method can be exploited. Which is why it is troublesome if someone cunning like Richard gets their hands on us. He could do a lot more damage here than he could do, let's say in Russia. Thanks to the former Communist era, Russia has a cohesive intelligence gathering network, and it is very hard to meddle in the internal affairs of these situations. Outsiders can't easily hire individual SVR or FSB officers and make them carry out bomb explosion. Everyone in their chain of command would have a say in it, and therefore is not a clandestine op, nor can it be construed as a false flag operation."

"But still, it was so foolish to create ISIS and then make the fictional group attack so many nations."

"Richard wanted to portray ISIS as the most grisly group in the world, and by making ISIS attack random cities across the world, he was able to instill fear in the governments. It was effective enough. By demonizing a specific religion, Richard ensured that one billion people would be hated earnestly."

"How did he ever manage to do it, though?"

Ted Collins exhaled. "He created fake stories about ISIS sex jihad brides and spread false news about how they were enslaving women and killing children. So, I am guessing you want to know how I learned about the ISIS fake bride news? Well, we have a team at the CIA that works in liaison with the BND and SVR. They confirmed that the sex jihad in Syria's ISIS were an elaborate disinformation campaign by some members of the Syrian government and a handful of mercenaries who were publicizing this news to distract international attention from its own crimes. But Richard is very thorough and he managed to hire actors to fabricate fatwa and other propaganda material in order to make the ISIS appear frightening. The Syrian government knew Richard was using actors to pose as sex jihad victims and give interviews to world media but they did not attempt to halt this misinformation and fake news campaign because it serves them well when other terror and rebels networks are tarnished in this manner."

"That is cruel."

"We didn't even see half of it. Now that ISIS has been exposed to be a fake terrorist group, I am worried that Richard would try to use China to attack the United States, since he is already running an extermination campaign there, killing million of ethnic Chinese Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang autonomous region. Personally I don't care how many millions of Chinese the sick bastards ends up killing, but I don't want him to target the United States, but he might."

"What makes you think he plans to attack America?"

"We receive intel- chatters on the dark web," Collins confided in me. "For the past two years, the FBI have been apprehending numerous bioweapons, chemical weapons and even nuclear weapons in various cities across the continental United States. Now, the funny thing is, most of these were the result of anonymous tips. Neither the FBI nor the CIA has any clue who leaves this tip for the law enforcement officials. And what is even more surprising is that all of these bombs and weapons are discovered near or adjacent to terrorists, Middle Eastern men, but none of the alleged perpetrators were ever captured alive."

"The FBI shot them on site?" I inquired.

“No, when the FBI got to the specific location, the perpetrators were always conveniently lying dead near the weapon. Of course, the FBI suspected that the terrorists were probably poisoned accidentally by their own weapons, or in the likely scenario, the person who tipped off the Bureau had them killed. But what the NSA is suspecting is that the person who gave over a dozen of tips to the FBI may have been actually the man behind smuggling in all those dirty bombs.”

“If he brought the bomb inland, why would he tip off the FBI?”

“Maybe an elaborate framing scheme to make it look natural, so when he detonates the actual bio or chemical weapon over the United States, the FBI will have no problem believing that those Middle Eastern kids who tried this so many times before were behind this. Richard gains a lot by this: if he can successfully blame ISIS for a nuclear explosion, he can then practically persuade the Congress to declare war on all of the Gulf nations, and behold, he could then seize all the oil money and live happily ever after.”

“Manipulation is too dangerous.”

“Personally, I think Spain was Richard’s finest job. He blackmailed the interior minister, and forced him to rescind a deal, and give him a cut of hundred million euros. We are talking about the best manipulating motherfucker scum in the world.”

“Maybe he can do all this because of the media...”

“Sure, it may not have been so easy without the media, but trust me when I say that even without the media, Richard and his private security contractors would have found some way to manipulate and trick people. We can only hope that he quits framing Middle Easterners or any other nation and Americans can one day find out the truth about September 11th attack and ISIS bombings.”

October, 2016

Since summer of 2016, I was keenly observing partial marine traffic in the South Pacific. Satellite images showed Chinese naval and coastguard vessels plying the northern waters of Russia’s Exclusive Economic Zone and upon closer inspection, my tech specialist discovered that China had come into the possession of several highly advanced pulse energy devices which they were attempting to weaponize and use in aerial and naval warfare. I knew China’s militarization of the South China Sea was hotly contested by the United States, so it did not come as a surprise to find out that the Central Intelligence Agency had sent a team to China to retrieve the device.

I knew how Cynthia’s stepfather worked and it was unlike him not to pursue the weapon for himself so that he could profit from its sale in the black market. By this time, I had tracked down Blacksand and found out it had eight bases inside mainland China. Richard had his tentacles spread throughout the country and I needed to know what he intended to do with his powers. Although the NSA deputy director was coordinating an inter-agency task force to locate Richard, but they had been miserably unsuccessful and hit many dead ends. I pursued an alternative angle with my own three-person team.

Based on the data I collected from the reconnaissance satellite, I deduced that the secret weapon was being developed inside the Yilin Naval base in southern China. I rented a Eurocopter attack helicopter and flew to the island fortress. I had expected to find a functioning naval base but instead came across a reinforced underground hangar: it was a Chinese underground air base! It was shocking because satellite images had no way of conforming this piece of information. I wanted to find out what was inside that secret base, so I manipulated the security screenings and broke in. Dozens of Shenyang J-8 Finback fighter jets were lined inside the subterranean space but there was no sign of the pulse weapon.

I contacted my chief of tech op, Joe, a jovial young man who had been previously employed by DOD, but had lost his security clearance after being accused of low-level cybercrimes. Prior to assisting me, Joe had worked as a scientific engineer at Caltech. His computer science degree from the University of Surrey enabled him to excel at the American institution.

Since meeting me, Joe agreed to collaborate and hack into dangerous places in the dark web in order to stop the bad guys from acquiring lethal information.

“Joe, I am at the base. Couldn’t find our devices here,” I told the hacker. “The computer terminal was not responding.”

Joe didn’t reply right away. Unlike my former Russian friend Dustin, who had devoted most of his adult life in helping me, Joe was more introvert and preferred to keep our interactions related to technical terminologies.

A moment of pause followed. Then Joe spoke. “I got something here,” he said excitedly. When he spoke quickly, his British accent became more pronounced. “Good thing you plugged in my device into the main terminal.”

Joe proceeded to explain how he found a bandwidth discrepancy in the Chinese base terminal, which he thought was a trojan virus but it appeared as if someone implanted the virus and renamed the RAM cache before stealing data.

“How do you know all this?” I asked him.

“Because from the device you plugged in, I was able to peek in the main computer. I detected a massive information hemorrhage. This can only mean that someone without authorization accessed their system and downloaded thirty gigabytes worth of satellite footage.”

“How did they do it?” I was genuinely puzzled. “I thought the Chinese military uses a secure system.”

“They do,” Joe agreed, “and this means that someone with CIA grade clearance was there right before you arrived.”

“Joe, I need you to use an overhead satellite and find out where the person went.”

“I already did,” the computer hacker replied. “Two men left this site and headed to a laboratory near the Hainan Island. I’m sending you the exact coordinates.”

“Thanks,” I said sincerely and began to prepare for my flight. I had to get to Hainan island and recover the device from whoever stole it.

Six hours later, my helicopter had touched down at the Huafeng harbor. If Joe was right, the device was taken to a building two miles south of my location. Following the international navigation app, I was able to locate the laboratory but instead of finding a building, I found the scattered rubble of a five-story concrete structure. Someone had demolished the entire building. I used my scanner to find a trace of the high-pulse device but it was nowhere to be found. I spent another five hours scouring the rubbles, searching for survivors but there were none. Most of the bodies had become cemented in the concrete.

I was preparing to leave the site when my eyes fell on a man lying by the curb. He had a disheveled appearance looked as though someone had left him for dead. The man was bleeding from a gunshot wound. My helicopter was ready for takeoff so I pulled the injured man on board and headed back to a safehouse in Taichung City, the only one I built in Taiwan. Aboard the helicopter, I administered basic medical treatment to his wounds and he gradually gained consciousness.

As soon as the passenger regained enough strength to stand, he began to struggle against the seat belt and tried to exit the helicopter. I attempted to restrain him physically but he proved far more skilled. Despite being gravely wounded, he nearly managed to overpower me. He fought like a professional, most likely Spec ops or Delta force, possibly CIA. I eventually persuaded him to calm down. I searched his rugged face for any identifying marks. His short brown hair and sculpted jawline made me think he was likely from Western Europe but I had no way to confirm this. I demanded to know his name but his cool absent gaze stared back at me and he refused to speak. I was mildly curious and got in touch with my tech op. I sent Joe a photo of the man I rescued and asked him to run it through our facial recognition app to see if there was a match. My scientific programmer couldn’t find a positive match with a precursory search so he ran several extensive background checks on the nameless man.

The man I had rescued from China was a former BND officer who had joined the CIA as a covert operative six years ago. Officially, the Federal Intelligence Service listed him as retired. His name, while serving in the foreign intelligence agency of Germany was Viktor Schluter, and since arriving in the United States, had offered his skills to serve American and German interests. Joe was able to track his records inside Germany’s defense ministry database and found out that Viktor was also a former *Kommando Spezialkräfte*, the infamous German special forces group that was known to be the most efficient tactical team in Europe.

I flew Viktor to the United States and implored him to tell me what he was doing in the remote Chinese island and how he ended up lying in the rubble of the laboratory. Reluctantly, he acceded to my requests and trusted me enough to discuss his mission in China.

Viktor and his partner in CIA’s counter-terrorism division was sent to the remote military base to retrieve a powerful pulse device which the Chinese government were planning to weaponize. After finding the weapon, he proceeded to the extraction point but his Agency partner double-crossed him. After shooting him lethally, the second operative seized the device, demolished the laboratory and left him for dead. Viktor added that if I hadn’t rescued him in time, he might have died.

I asked Joe to run the identity of Viktor’s partner through a global facial recognition app that specifically narrows down search results to affiliates of the intelligence community. Results confirmed what I had suspected: his partner had three separate offshore bank accounts, each containing over five million dollars. The man was undoubtedly working as a mole and had stolen the high pulse device to thwart CIA efforts. When Viktor learned he had been betrayed, he agreed to assist me in recovering the device. I was grateful to have an extra pair of hands on deck. I knew KSK was an elite commando force similar to the British SAS or the American Green Berets and its operatives were the finest in Europe. Having him on my side would be advantageous.

Viktor Schluter was still unwell. His wound was raw and his breathing was laborious. The former German special KSK operative was suffering from flu-like symptoms. His fever peaked and he was sweating profusely. The physicians I brought in informed me his situation was not life-threatening situation and he would likely recover with adequate rest.

I offered Viktor a secure bungalow in Vancouver Island where he could stay and recuperate. On our way to the safehouse, we witnessed a mugging incident. From behind the jeep’s opaque windows, we could see that an elderly woman was being robbed. Two men were holding knives at her and urged her to give up all her possessions. I considered notifying the nearest police patrol car about the

incident or sound the fire alarm remotely in the adjacent building with the hope that the presence of so many people evacuating the buildings would make the muggers scatter, but I did not have enough time to decide. Viktor, despite suffering from a near-fatal gun shot wound, leaped from the moving vehicle and raced to help the woman in distress. He knocked the knives off the robber's hand and helped the old lady to her feet.

I was astounded by his zeal for helping people. Viktor utterly disregarded his own safety when he saw someone else was in need. It was rare to find someone who was so willing to risk his life and well-being for complete strangers. When I dropped Viktor at the safehouse, I made him an offer. I promised to facilitate him with all necessary equipment if he chose to collaborate with me in helping people whose lives were at risk. Two months later, we embarked on our first joint mission.

My tech op from Caltech left a coded message on my cellphone. There was an alert on Europol's secure server; an attack was imminent somewhere in that continent and the casualties were believed to be far reaching. I contacted the Vice-President for Europe of Interpol's executive committee and relayed my concerns to him but he expressed his inability to pursue the investigation without any solid evidence. Knowing I would not likely receive any support from the American intelligence bureaus, I decided to call Viktor and enlist his help. His background of working inside Europe proved extraordinarily constructive. After studying the coded message, Viktor said he had to fly to Lyon and find the source of the information. Without finding out who the sender of the message was, it would be impossible to narrow down the scope of the threat and prevent it. That afternoon, we flew to France.

The source of the intel was difficult to trace. Viktor Schluter got in touch with the Deputy Central Director of the Judicial Police in Paris who had been his mentor years ago. The French police chief was able to provide us with several addresses of known criminals. We ruled them out one by one. On the third raid, we stormed into an old school building. It appeared abandoned but as Viktor and I made our way past the perimeter, we heard gunshots. At least eight hostiles were firing at us. Viktor offered to give me cover fire and told me to slip inside the building and try to locate the computer and make a copy of the hard drive. I felt hesitant to leave him to fight off eight attackers but he insisted. I tossed him my Ruger EC9 and ran to the structure.

The first room I entered was empty except for a thin man. He was urgently stuffing papers in the small fireplace and did not notice me. I tackled him from behind and knocked him to the ground. By the time I got to the fireplace, most of the papers were destroyed. I managed to salvage a portion of a printed page. It looked like a letter. The only words that were legible were scrawled on the bottom. 10-18 AM.

"I've studied every possible combination," I admitted to Viktor once I joined him at the extraction point. "Joe searched the entire continent for a meeting or conference that is scheduled to begin at 10:18 in the morning. But he got nothing."

"It's not the time," Viktor whispered, with some severity in his tone. He looked as if someone had died.

"What do you mean?" I asked, recalling the two letters that were printed next to the date.

"10.18 A.M." Viktor repeated. "Don't you see? It's tomorrow. Today is the seventeenth. October 18 is tomorrow."

"It's a date. Of course!" I exclaimed. "Then why the initials? If *A.M.* doesn't stand for *after midday*, then what could it be?"

Viktor didn't reply right away. "Give me a minute. Let me see if I am right... I'm running a search. Okay. This is it." He turned his laptop to face me. "Agnes Mueller. You know who she is?"

I moved slowly to the screen. "A.M. They were talking about the President of Germany."

Viktor nodded. "We have to assume that this group is targeting the chancellor. On 10/18, that is tomorrow, Chancellor Mueller will be visiting the World Economic Forum in Davos."

"Why would someone want to assassinate her?" I wondered aloud. "If we can't find a motive, it'll be harder to locate the perpetrators."

"Maybe it is something she will say in the Forum," Viktor suggested softly.

I immediately contacted Joe and asked him to pull up a copy of Chancellor Mueller's speech that she was scheduled to deliver in Davos. The transcript was pretty straightforward, with a casual mention of nuclear power. I re read that section. In her speech, the Chancellor was supposed to announce how Germany would end the use of nuclear power by 2021 and also halt the use of coal to generate electric power by 2028. Her speech mentioned how these measures would reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enable Europe to become climate neutral by 2030. The Chancellor was also supposed to pledge one billion euros for a global disarmament alliance, which would force the Schengen area countries to dismantle half of their arsenal in an effort to bring stability and security to Europe and the world.

"I traced it back to a man known as Lukas. He is believed to be one of the leaders of a crime unit in North Rhine-Westphalia."

"Any clue what Lukas is doing in North Rhine-Westphalia?" I asked Joe.

Viktor replied. "NRW is a strategic geographical location for organized criminals. Netherlands is one of the world's leading producers of methamphetamine and is located west of the state. The illegal shipments often pass Antwerp or the Rhine."

“The river?” I said.

Viktor nodded. “NRW provides a lucrative market for drug and arms dealers.

I reconnected to Joe and asked him to find everything he could about the man named Lukas.

The computer programmer got back to me within minutes. “This is some serious evil you are dealing with,” Joe warned me. “Lukas founded the *Mannschaft*, a transnational organized crime gang based in Germany. Most of his associates are former inmates. And they openly declare support for the German far-right parties, especially the main opposition party in Parliament. Their wire transactions are mostly covered up but it seems they are partially funded by the far-right neo-Nazi group.”

“All right Joe, tell me what you found about Lukas?”

“He was arrested last year for an attempted arson, but the charges were dropped due to lack of evidence.”

“What was he trying to burn?”

“A building. Wait, it was one of the headquarters of *IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie*.”

“What is that?” I repeated.

Viktor cleared his throat. “The IG BCE is a union covering workers who are employed in the coal mining industry or the even natural gas, leather or petrol and other related products. Since 2017, the IG BCE has been playing a key role in Germany's energy transition.”

“Why does the *Mannschaft* care about clean energy or mining?”

“It is no secret that far-right extremism in Germany is spreading and those groups might be trying to influence policies related to the transition to clean energy. Or they may be unhappy with Chancellor Mueller for one of her other policies.”

I sighed. “In any case, we need to let the German government know. Agnes Mueller's trip to Davos should be cancelled.”

“I'll notify my former commander at the *Kommando Spezialkräfte*,” Viktor agreed. “He will ensure the Chancellor's personal security is alerted.”

Lukas was apprehended by the *Militära underrättelse- och säkerhetstjänsten* while in transit at the Malmö Airport. Swedish Intelligence officers interrogated him and successfully identified his accomplices inside Germany. Their identities were forwarded to the BND office in Berlin and a tactical team handpicked by the Chancellor's office conducted simultaneous raids in fifteen German cities. Among the many domestic terrorists who were arrested, eighteen police officers and nine domestic intelligence staff in Germany's western state of North Rhine-Westphalia were found to be involved in the far-right activities including the plan to assassinate the leader of their country.

In addition to persecuting the accused men, Berlin police suspended over forty officers who worked for an intelligence observation team. They were guilty of endorsing violence against elected officials on online chatrooms and holding neo-Nazi views. Following this attempt on the Chancellor's life, the NRW Interior Ministry implemented sweeping reforms in the state's anti-terrorism laws in an effort to curb the surge in crime.

The next morning, I downloaded a copy of the *Rheinische Post* which covered sparse details about the previous day's events. Without mentioning how German intelligence prevented the assassination of the Chancellor, the news reported that a large criminal gang in North Rhine-Westphalia was permanently disbanded and the members incarcerated.

The mission in France and Germany frightened me as much as it relieved me. I was relieved to be able to save the German chancellor's life but the thought that a seemingly obscure criminal group was capable of assassinating a major world leader terrified me. What if I hadn't been able to decipher the small clue? What if I was too late? It was comforting to know I didn't have to shoulder the responsibility alone. Viktor's presence gave me the strength to persevere in the oscillating events of this fast-paced world.

Like my former hacker Dustin, who had accompanied me to the United States after the collapse of the Soviet training Camp, Viktor Schluter was a dear friend and fellow operative. We were not bound by formal business contracts. Just as Dustin was not my employee, neither was Viktor. When I rescued the German KSK operative from the desolate island in China, he volunteered to help people who were suffering from a similar fate and we complemented one another. I used the money I had saved while working at the Camp to purchase ammunition or data but most of the time, that alone wasn't enough. Fortunately, a huge part of my revenue came from my business ventures I knew little about and cared even less for. For many years, I had the privilege of protecting people whose lives were in danger: business executives, well-known attorneys, criminal court justices, entrepreneurs, researchers and politicians whose rivals wanted to eliminate them for some reason. I would have my tech op intercept the communication channels of the potential assassins and stop them before they executed their order.

Diethelm Adelhütte was an active-duty German captain who served in the Bundeswehr for the past two decades. He lived near the Darmstadt military base in the Hessa province of the southwestern part of Germany.

Captain Adelhütte commanded approximately one thousand *Heeresuniformträger*, who were mainly army uniform wearing personnel of the German military.

Before I was acquainted with my good friend Viktor, I had a colleague in the eastern part of Berlin who had helped me on numerous occasions while doing active missions in Prague, Vienna and Warsaw. Diethelm Adelhütte was a man I trusted, and he saved my life many times, even risking his own to make sure I was safe.

When I was framed by Richard for a petty crime and arrested by the German police, Diethelm Adelhütte rescued me and helped me escape the corrupt police officers.

During one of our joint missions, I received an urgent call from Sam Clark, the American intelligence officer who was protecting my adopted mother's family. Sam told me that my family was on vacation in Europe and was returning to the United States, but he did not have enough agents to assign to their security detail.

I became worried. What will happen to my family? How will I protect them? What is I cannot trust anyone in Europe to guard them while they travel to America?

Diethelm Adelhütte noticed my pale face, and he asked me what was wrong. I told him about my family and how my adopted mother and her daughter were attacked several times in the past year. Diethelm became very concerned and he promised me that he would personally escort my family until they reached New York safely.

I expressed my gratitude to my German friend and he bid me farewell.

Three days later, Diethelm Adelhütte came to my safehouse in Avondale, Arizona, and began to tell me a frightening incident that took place.

My adopted mother's family were returning to the United States from an overseas vacation, when the security team I put in place detected chatters on the dark net about numerous discussions related to kidnapping while the family was on air.

Captain Adelhütte said he decided to discreetly escort the family to America to make sure they arrived safely. It was at that time that he decided to inspect the passenger jet the family was about to board.

Initially, the plane seemed to be in perfect condition, but the flight passenger manifest listed fifteen men whose background information was not available to the BND or Europol.

The co-pilot of the flight was also a novice who never flew a passenger plane before.

One of the stewardesses was a former army machine gunner. The unusual occupation of a military woman posing as an airplane flight attendant perplexed Captain Adelhütte so he took the liberty of securing himself a seat on that plane.

The check-in and take off went smoothly, and the stewardess passed around packets of nuts and salads to all of the passengers prior to their inflight meal. Diethelm Adelhütte wanted to remain vigilant, so he declined the food services and focused on keeping a close watch on the Russian woman and her daughter. One hour after most of the people in the plane ate their first meal, dozens of people complained that they felt ill. Two women threw up and vomited all over the aisle. Another young man began to hallucinate and claimed to see monsters. Fifteen passengers in the airplane were fast asleep, and they were being unable to wake up from their slumber. The passengers began to show signs of mental exhaustion, but the flight attendants did not appear too concerned. An elderly collapsed after eating the flight meal, and he was suffering a mild heart attack. Captain Adelhütte was skilled in basic medical procedures, so he knew at once that the passengers in the plane were all suffering from a reaction to a food they had eaten. As soon as he realized the plane's food supply may have been contaminated, he approached the Russian woman and her family and warned them not to touch any of the food item that the flight attendants were serving.

As per Captain Adelhütte's suspicions, the food was spiked with high doses of sleeping potions. It was designed to knock all the passengers to a long and permanent sleep.

The German captain immediately suspected that there were several saboteurs on the plane and he kept a close watch on the Russian woman's family to make sure they were safe.

Upon closer inspection, he found out that the entire plane's food supply was contaminated with a drug combination that acted as a knockout agent. The first batch of passengers who consumed the food began to complain of nausea and some vomited with food poisoning.

Hours later, the second wave of calamity targeted the family. The passenger plane was only seven hours away from arriving at its destination.

It was the American nun who was targeted this time, as she was walking down the plane's aisle to go to the restroom.

On her way passing through the first-class section, two muscular men grabbed her and tried to inject a sleeping drug into her, but she screamed in fright.

Diethelm Adelhütte heard the distressed shout and ran to her aid. He used his service weapon to subdue the two men and safely escorted the American nun to the rear of the plane to her family.

Afterwards, Captain Adelhütte interrogated the men and they admitted that they were hired by a mercenary group to kidnap the Russian woman's daughter. Diethelm Adelhütte asked them how they planned to kidnap a young woman inside of a passenger plane that was bound for New York, and they replied that their orders were to escort the young woman to the cargo section of the plane.

The German officer immediately took two flight attendants with him and went to inspect the luggage cargo holder below the passenger seating area.

To his utter surprise, he found eighteen heavily armed men waiting in the luggage holding area of the plane. They were all smuggled into the air plane to kidnap the young American nun, and assault her.

The German officer knew that the air plane had been targeted for the specific purpose of kidnapping, so he began to inspect the internal infrastructure of the jetliner.

The plane's bathroom was fitted like an elevator, which was designed to drop into the cargo holding area in the luggage section, where eighteen men including American and Italian mercenaries and special forces who worked for Richard's black ops programs, were waiting with guns and other weapons in order to assault the American nun.

The men in the cargo section were also carrying vials of drugs, designed to make the Russian woman's daughter hysterical. So, no one would believe her if she claimed someone had carried the bathroom like an elevator to the lower section of the plane. Luckily, she and her cousin walked to the rear of the plane and used a separate restroom.

And the second time, the young woman's cousin was waiting outside the restroom door and waited for her to exit. The two women were talking and kept in contact, but somehow the door of the bathroom jammed, and was refusing to open. Captain Adelhütte knew it was a sabotage and he immediately ordered the flight attendants to bring a jackhammer and broke open the bathroom door to rescue the Russian woman's daughter.

He was able to prevent the second attempt of kidnapping, because the hijackers had sabotaged the bathroom door in order to make it lock permanently so they could shift the small enclosure like an elevator and slide it into the cargo section below.

However, the deadly attack on the young woman's life was traumatizing. She had tears streaming down her cheeks. The young woman tried earnestly to control herself but could not succeed. The American nun's body was shaking and her mother sat her down and tried to calm her. The terror she had survived was difficult for anyone to bear.

Even after the plane landed safely in New York's JFK airport, the Russian woman's family was shaken and scared. The horror the American woman had experienced caused a severe shock to disturb her heart and mind.

When Diethelm Adelhütte told me what happened to my family on that plane, I was petrified. I felt weak and helpless. How could I ever stop all those mercenaries from harming my family? How could I ever stop them from coming after the innocent daughter?

I told my German friend that I did not know how to protect the Russian woman and her children, but Captain Adelhütte assured me that he would personally offer security and protection to my family for as long as he was alive. I was very grateful to the German officer and we remained friends for many years.

Pentagon's chief cyber operations officer, Hsu Chun-hsiung, contacted me on my direct line. I had met him once during a joint NSA's signals intelligence briefing. Hsu wanted to apprise me of an anomaly he discovered.

When I asked him to elaborate, the cyber specialist clarified. "A U.S. Navy destroyer was nearly hit by a Russian ship in the North Arabian Sea."

"Did the military conduct an investigation into that?"

"Pentagon contacted the Russian commander and he claimed the controls of his vessel was temporarily hacked and they lost control and were minutes away from colliding with the American destroyer when an engineer onboard managed to disconnect the faulty cable and restore control of the ship."

I inquired. "Which Russian ship was that?"

"The one that nearly hit the American destroyer?" Hsu Chun-hsiung said. "It was the guided-missile frigate Admiral Gerebech."

"But I heard of that ship. Admiral Gerebech is part of Russia's Northern Fleet and is one of the newest in their navy."

"Yes, and it is also one of Russian navy's most advanced warships," Hsu confirmed. "The ship is armed with cruise missiles, air defense systems and other laser weapons."

"The question is how was a high-tech vessel hacked so easily?" I shot a withered look at the cyber analyst. "Hsu, can you imagine what would have happened if the Russian ship actually struck the American destroyer? The U.S. Navy would have declared it an act of war and retaliated with surface to air missiles, leading to a catastrophic world war."

"You think I don't know that?" The Pentagon analyst looked agitated. "That is why I've spent the past three months scouring through every wireless signal that was transmitted to the Russian ship, and I think I may have found something."

"Well?" I gave a questioning look at Hsu.

"It was supposed to look as though Russia did it, but the control board of their warship was definitely hacked."

"How can you be certain?"

"Hours before the Russian vessel went haywire, Pentagon's hypersonic sensor trackers detected a massive spike in data and traffic coming from inland United States."

"What does that mean?"

"That the attack was ordered or carried out from someone in the United States," Pentagon's chief cyber operations officer remarked, "so I began to narrow down to source. And this is what I found. Someone within forty-mile radius in Pennsylvania was pulling it off. I used satellite imagery to locate the nearest cell tower there. It was owned by a shell company that managed funds for League 13. NSA's now defunct black ops division."

"How did you track this place down?"

Pentagon's chief cyber operations officer beamed. "I looked for clues," he explained. "Once I narrowed down the search area, I kept an eye out for data spikes that would come from an operational super computer. I scoured satellite images for cell towers in the middle of nowhere, columns, anything that looked out of place. And I found this lair."

"Can you zoom in on the satellite footage of the area? I recognize the landmark."

Hsu Chun-hsiung enlarged the image and I could see the outline of a familiar structure. "I've been to that safehouse before."

"Sorry?" Hsu said quizzically.

"Richard spends his weekend in that area. It's his safehouse."

The cyber operation's officer looked mildly annoyed. "Who is Richard?"

"The man who ran the black op division of the NSA." I told Hsu. "I worked for him in League 13. If Richard is paying ultranationalists in Russia to begin a revolt, he will not stop trying. Let the SVR know that they may face attacks or violent unrest in the coming weeks."

"How is it possible for one man to orchestrate a series of false flag attacks across the globe?"

"Richard is one person I do not underestimate."

Hsu Chun-hsiung sat straighter in his chair. "Then do you think this is related to the Russian ship accident?"

"What is related to what exactly?"

"I traced a wire transfer to a numbered account in the state-backed Promsvyazbank." Hsu informed me.

"How much?"

"Six million dollars."

"Did you find out whose account received that much money?"

"No, but I was able to track down the guys who picked up the checks. Bank's security feed showed this man withdrawing more than half of the money." Hsu played the video on his screen. "Around twenty million rubles."

"ID?" I inquired.

"He's Russian, so his profile didn't exist in our database. I used Pentagon's open channel to alert FSB's counterterrorism center about the man and they got back to us with the information. It seems that whoever sent the money was planning to recruit ultranationalist marchers in Russia and paid them generously to start chaos and unrest. Their goal was to eventually overthrow government."

"They were told to march?" I tried to clarify. "Where?"

"The ultranationalist party had been planning to hold a rally on National Unity Day. The event was dubbed *Russian March* and was co-organized by several opposition parties but they were the only ones who received cash from American banks." Pentagon's chief cyber operations officer tossed a weary glance at me. "This looks bad, man, as if American government is paying Russian to revolt against their legitimately elected government."

"How many people did FSB take into custody?" I wanted to know.

"For now, I think they are just holding the bank guy," Hsu Chun-hsiung consulted his monitor. "During interrogation, he admitted to using the money from his numbered account to hire men and women to recruit followers who would march to Moscow and Nizhny

Novgorod, a city some 400km east of the capital, even though Moscow city officials refused to grant them permits for the march to take place.”

I sighed audibly and told the cyber operations officer that I was still skeptical that the protests and marches in Moscow were the result of foreign interference.

Hsu Chun-hsiung was taken aback. He leaped to his feet and held a small electronic notepad before me. “Everyone still thinks that the earthquake in Turkey was a natural disaster. Remember that. Nuclear testing has not been confirmed, not to the media I mean.”

I blinked in surprise. I didn’t know what Hsu was trying to tell me so I begged him to elaborate.

“You know about the *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilâtı*?”

“Yes,” I admitted, “it is a government intelligence agency in Turkey.”

“Right.” Hsu said in a businesslike tone. “Well, my old pal Ömer Çavuşoğlu used to work as a computer programmer in *MİT* and came with an entourage to Pentagon in around 2010, but he now holds a senior position in the ministry of external affairs. He got in touch with me hours after an earthquake struck nine miles off the Greek town of Karlovasi on Samos island. Hundreds of Turkish civilians died in the disaster.”

“Earthquakes happen in those islands all the time.” I commented.

“That was what I told Ömer, but he then sent me a copy of the seismic report from one of their local army bases. When I studied the report, I didn’t know what to think.”

“Why?”

“Because the wavelength didn’t correspond with the usual naturally occurring earthquakes.” Hsu announced. “Someone dug a hole about three meters wide in a tested a nuclear bomb near the Turkish and Greek island. And it was not a government sanctioned operation, either.”

“You sound so sure.” I told him.

“I *know* it was a nuke induced earthquake,” Hsu reiterated, “not only because the seismic report is incompatible with the usual wavelength of natural earthquakes, but due to the radioactive gas that was discovered from the cavity over the test site.”

“How certain are you of the escape of radioactivity from the cavity?”

“Pretty sure. For one thing, there was no test tunnel in this operation.”

“What kind of tunnel is a test tunnel?”

“Well, you see, generally, for underground nuclear tests, two kinds of tunnels are dug. One is drilled into the explosion location after the detonation so scientists can do core sampling, but this one has only one tunnel. To start off the detonation, a nuclear device is assembled and lowered into a hole until it reaches the detonation position and then the hole is sealed. Now, why this struck as odd to me is the location of this nuclear test. Underground testing are usually carried out in carefully selected locations based on geological structure, before scientists even consider drilling a vertical hole of around five hundred meters deep into the earth.”

“Are there after effects of such tests?”

Hsu nodded. “In these underground tests, the soil absorbs most of the reactive chemical compounds, so the only nuclides that manages to escape to the atmosphere are krypton-85 and xenon-133. The drone that was sent to the Greek island detected an alarming presence of these gases. There is no question that it was a nuke.”

“There is no evidence that earthquakes occur as a result of underground nuclear bomb tests,” I maintained.

“Correction. There *was* no evidence but that was until 1998, but it was common knowledge that tremors had occurred. Fault movements and ground fractures have been reported, and explosions often precede a series of aftershocks. In a few cases, seismic energy released by fault movements has exceeded that of the explosion itself, and caused damage.”

“How would we be sure if that wasn’t a normal earthquake?” I asked again.

The Pentagon’s chief cyber operations officer typed for a moment in his keyboard and looked up. “I just logged into the main server room of Air Force Technical Applications Center at Fielding Air Force Base in Ohio. So far, the military’s preliminary seismological data is indicating a 6.1 magnitude quake took place at the location of the nuclear test.”

“How do Seismologists determine whether an earthquake is due to a seismic event or manmade nuclear test?” I inquired.

“Seismologists study the waving lines that appear on the seismograph. The wavy lines you see are the result of an explosion. It’s wiggly. And a lot different from the ones generated by an earthquake. When tectonic plates slip beneath the surface of the earth, you notice a shear wave propagation.”

“Who monitors these, Hsu?” I asked testily. The thought of earthquake inducing nuclear underground tests was a petrifying idea and I wished it was not the case in Turkey.

Hsu continued to explain his report to me. “The United States military uses seismographs to detect and measure bomb blasts- almost anywhere in the world, except maybe in North Korea because we don’t have proper equipment near those volatile regions, but when an underground test is suspected, special planes are sent to fly to suspected areas to do air sampling. After the Turkey blasts or earthquake if you like, I forwarded Ömer ÇavuŞoğlu’s report to my superiors who approved a standard inspection and sent a Boeing WC-135 Constant Phoenix plane to collect samples from the Greek island of Samos, near the quake’s epicenter in the Aegean Sea, around the Turkish coastal city.”

“And?”

“After analyzing the air samples, krypton-85 and xenon-133 was found. In lethal amounts.”

“I don’t enjoy being a pessimist, Hsu, but isn’t it true that Turkey sits on top of fault lines and is prone to earthquakes? I remember the one in 1999. Thousands of people were killed in a twin earthquake in northwestern Turkey.”

“Your point is valid.” Hsu assured me. “And it’s not only Turkey that is susceptible to quakes. Earthquake are frequent in Greece as well but *this* tremor was different.”

“The tremors were felt across western Turkey, including in Istanbul as well as in the Greek capital of Athens.” I reminded the cyber analyst. “How could a nuclear underground test do so much damage?”

“Well, it all depends on the kind of bomb that was used,” Hsu replied. “I was able to trace the shockwaves and isolated a unique pattern. You see, each type of radioactive bomb has a signature wavelength and the U.S. military uses it. It is really quite simple to detect which earthquakes are as a result of an underground nuclear test. Anyone with access to internet can figure it out.” The cyber operations officer paused. “I shared my suspicions with a geophysicist at Harvard University and he said that Pentagon used this technology back in 2012 to identify the kind of bomb North Koreans had tested underground. Of course, the North Koreans lied about it and said it was thermonuclear bomb, but our tests indicated they had tested a first-generation plutonium fission bomb.”

“In case of this Turkish earthquake, satellite imagery can point out the culprit, right?”

“Satellite reconnaissance is not going to be too helpful, because the place where the hole was drilled had no active monitoring signal overhead.”

“They couldn’t have carried out the nuclear test themselves,” I reasoned. “Turkey and Greece do not have any plutonium- or uranium- production facilities anywhere in their country.”

“I know that,” Hsu Chun-hsiung said impatiently, “which is why we should be scared out of our wits now. Because it means that someone else, a third party with a handful of nuclear warheads are running around Europe.”

“Why do you say that?”

Hsu Chun-hsiung shot a worried glance at me. “You might want to sit down for this. Two of Russia’s nuclear missile storage bunkers were broken into and unidentified assailants stole a number of warheads. Officially, the Russian government denied they had a security breach this but Pentagon’s reconnaissance satellite can confirm the heist. Unofficially, SVR deputy director got in touch with NSA and requested assistance in locating the missing warhead. And now, they’ll have one less to look for, because it was a Russian nuke that was detonated in that underground testing hole in Turkey.”

“Tell me more about your contact in Turkey’s ministry of external affairs? Does he have any idea why his nation was targeted?”

“Actually, he does,” Hsu said nervously. “I am afraid that was why I wanted to get in touch with you. Could use your help.”

“Why was Turkey targeted by a nuclear bomb wielding fanatic?”

“Turkey wasn’t the target,” Hsu said. “The Turkish president was.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Six days before the underground nuclear test triggered the earthquake in Turkey, the president’s office received a message from an encrypted line. The caller demanded he claim responsibility for the nuclear attack on London, Berlin and Paris.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I remarked. “There had been no bombardment of those cities.”

“Yes, the caller said he will detonate bombs over those cities after getting confirmation and a confession video from the Turkish leader that he had ordered the attacks.”

“No one would have believed it,” I stated. “Turkey does not have any nuclear weapons.”

“Apparently, the blackmailer didn’t care. He said there would be a number of attacks on Europe in recent months and he needed Turkey to claim responsibility for those.”

“I see, It’s like ISIS all over again. The gunmen Richard had hired in Vienna to shoot up church goers and passerby were also instructed to claim affiliation with the fictional terrorist group.”

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It was an uneventful weekend. Viktor Schluter was away in an undercover operation and could not be reached.

Joe was watching the evening news when I returned to my residence. The newscasters were talking about an attack on a Frenchman that took place a day earlier.

“What is the official police version of Friday’s attack?” I joined the hacker in his lab.

Joe pulled his e-tablet and searched a few key words. “Paris police claims it was the work of an ethnic Russian, who was born and raised in Moscow. DGSE gave a press briefing. They said they came across evidence that the terrorist was funded by a Kremlin based businessmen. The suspect had a brief shootout with police in the commune of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine before dying of bullet wounds. The French anti-terrorism prosecutor also hinted that Russia might have been financially supporting the 18-year-old murder suspect.”

“Where are they getting these ideas from?” I uttered the question like a statement.

Joe didn’t look up. “That’s odd. His family members have been arrested as well.”

I leaned closer to the monitor. “Don’t the family live in Russia?”

“No, they emigrated to France from Russia in the 2000s.” The British hacker scrolled through a new tab. “French prosecutors say one of those arrested has a half sister who is a member of ISIS terrorist group, and hence they are pointing towards Russia.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. “But didn’t we supply Interpol with concrete evidence that ISIS was a project created by Blacksand under the courtesy of Richard, who went out of his way to frame the Russian government for it?”

“We sent a copy of our report to Interpol,” Joe stressed, “but I don’t think *Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure* received the results of our investigation.”

“What are you waiting for? Send it to them.” I demanded.

“Working on it.” The British hacker replied calmly. “Don’t bite my arm off.”

“And find out the real perpetrators,” I couldn’t stop pacing. “If we don’t supply France’s external intelligence agency with the real culprit, then we can’t stop them pointing fingers at the Kremlin.”

“The trial is public, John, meaning world media will be watching closely.”

“What are the charges against the alleged perpetrator?”

“The Russian kid allegedly beheaded his teacher and fired at officers before getting killed. Conveniently. He can’t defend himself in court now.”

My head ached terribly. I couldn’t understand why Richard was targeting France. He never hid his dislike for me so it wasn’t surprising to see him frame Russia for making the terrorist cell ISIS or trying to coax American generals at Barksdale Air Force Base to launch nuclear warheads at Moscow. He did all that to punish me.

But why target France? I was not from there. I had not visited the country in years.

“Joe,” I said suddenly. “Can you look into Richard’s travel itinerary and cross reference it for any location in France?”

A moment later, the hacker whistled softly. “How did you guess it?”

“Guess?” I repeated.

“You knew he’d be in Paris with his daughter, didn’t you?”

“Uh, no, I just had a hunch.” I looked closely at the hacker. “What did you find?”

“In the past three years, Richard went to Paris seven times. Each time he was accompanied by his daughter and this man. Name is Gérald Sarközy.”

I recognized the photo. It was Cynthia’s French boyfriend.

“So, I did a separate search. Your ex, I mean Cynthia and Gérald traveled to France over twenty time in the past three years.”

“Any idea why they visited so often?”

“Gérald Sarközy’s father is a famous businessman. He also wields great influence in the *Assemblée nationale*. That’s part of the French Parliament.” Joe took a sip of his energy drink. “Oh, and the boyfriend owns several estates in the countryside. Satellite images show Cynthia relaxing in a château outside Paris. There is a huge security presence. The Gérald chap likes to stay heavily guarded.”

“Interesting,” I muttered. I knew Richard had a reputation in murdering or destroying anyone his daughter slept with. What if Gérald Sarközy became his latest target? Richard found it very difficult to bear losing Cynthia to someone else. Attacking France may be his way of seeking retribution.

I spoke slowly. “There’s only two reason why someone would up their guards: if they made enemies or if they were under attack.”

"Right," Joe said. "I will do a search, try to see if Gérald Sarközy's life came under attack recently. Here goes. Attempted drive-by shooting six months ago. Gunman was killed when the motorbike he was riding collided with a lamppost. Sarközy's car exploded last month. His driver started the ignition but the vehicle blew up before he was able to enter."

"Classic murder style," I asserted. "It's Richard. He is behind this."

"You are sure?"

"Ninety-nine percent sure," I replied. "This is the same way Richard had tried to kill me when I used to date his daughter. He had an assassin blow up my boat house after I asked Cynthia to move in. He also killed her first husband Noah, then her boyfriend Tim, and now poor Gérald is facing his wrath."

"If you are right, it wouldn't be too difficult to prove," the hacker said thoughtfully. "I am tracing all the phone calls the alleged perpetrator of the beheading made in the days prior to the attacks. Also, if anyone connected to the Russian teenager received large amounts of money."

"Okay, you do that." I rubbed my temple, trying to ease the throbbing that was building in my head.

The last thing I needed was Richard to begin another crusade against Russia and framed Russian nationals for heinous crimes such as beheadings and public executions.

Viktor and I continued trying to rescue people whose lives were in danger. While I was not always able to get to the victims on time, I had managed to save hundreds. Despite my best efforts to remain anonymous, occasionally it was impossible to hide my true identity from the CEO of a tech company or a Pulitzer winning reporter or an infamous public prosecutor. Some would contact me months later to inform me that they had purchased shares in their companies or business ventures in my name. Unbeknownst to myself, I found myself owning significant shares of multinational companies and even received profits. A huge part of that wealth was used to purchase intel from the various contacts I built during my work at the colonel's Camp, but I also tried to maintain the philanthropy I had begun during my time at the Siberian orphanage. I knew the children I grew up with were still struggling to maintain decent livelihoods and the orphans who were now housed in those dilapidated state buildings were faring no better. Every month, I wired money into the account of several trusted men in Russia who would use it to purchase food and medical supplies for those children at the orphanage.

I wish I could say it was enough, that I was able to give those children what they deserved, or repay my friends for their sacrifices and give them monetary compensation for risking their lives to save people each day, but the it wasn't the case. The truth was I never had enough money, data or ammunition. Oftentimes, in order to execute a mission and fly to a remote part of the world, I needed access to a small aircraft that could be equipped with all the computer gadget Dustin needed to hack into the nearest satellites. There would be no money left in my accounts so I had to borrow from Dustin or other friends and use their money to complete the mission. My friends understood the mission and it was comforting to know that our partnership was not one of professional commercialism but rather of profound comradeship.

When my dear friend Dustin became incapacitated, I was heartbroken and feared I would never again have the privilege of knowing someone so brilliant and gentlehearted. But life offered me an unexpected gift. I met Joe, the British programmer who was working at Caltech and had insatiable curiosity and creativity. With Joe and Viktor in my life, for the first time in a long time, I did not feel alone. I had people around me I could trust and love, people who cared about me.

Ted Saunders was a senior official at the United States Army Counterintelligence and he requested a meeting with me about the developments in Central Asia.

When I met him, he immediately explained the volatile situation that was going on in the former Soviet states. "I recently came across additional evidence which proves that the Italian-American naval commander was behind the recent Taliban recreation in Afghanistan."

"What evidence did you come across?" I asked Army Counterintelligence officer.

Saunders answered. "Eighteen German citizens along with twenty U.S. civilians carrying firearms on a private plane were arrested in Tajikistan last week after trying to enter Afghanistan."

"They were mercenaries, right?" I wanted to confirm.

"Yes. Local Tajikistani authorities who were assisted by Russian officials were able to detain the would-be vigilantes who claimed they were entering Afghanistan to help those in distress. After being caught with firearms by border police and undercover officials, the American State Department claimed those men were not affiliated with any known terror groups. However, we looked into their backgrounds and I was personally able to interrogate two of them."

"You spoke with those men?" I asked.

The United States Army Counterintelligence officer replied. "I was able to use my contacts in Tajikistan and they allowed me to question the arrestees. Among the Americans who were in the holding cell, there were several U.S. military veterans who admitted that they served alongside Afghan interpreters and personnel, now was doing groundwork for the creation of a Taliban fighting force."

"They actually admitted to being the creators of the new Taliban?" I repeated in surprise.

"Yes," the Army Counterintelligence officer said, "and one of them told me that he received his orders directly from a naval commander. He couldn't tell me the name of his commander, but when I showed him a picture of the Italian admiral, he confirmed that it was the man who sent him and his German colleague on this mission to Afghanistan."

"What mission did the Italian man send them for?" I said.

"These mercenaries belonged to the Lethal Unit. They told me their mission was to execute the remaining leaders of the real Taliban, and to make sure local and international media received enough videos and pictures of sex-slavery, public flogging and beheadings. They were also ordered to recruit Afghan women and pay them to give fake interviews to CNN and other news outlets, so that everyone begins to believe that the Taliban are dangerous."

I quickly asked him. "What did you do after hearing these bizarre framing attempt?"

Saunders answered. "I headed straight to Afghanistan, and toured Kabul and some other major Taliban stronghold. I was finally able to meet with several Taliban commanders, and after I told them that I knew they were being paid by an Italian man to pose as terrorists, one of them admitted that he was not a Muslim."

"How could a Taliban leader not be Muslim?" I inquired.

The Army Counterintelligence officer replied. "The man I spoke to said he was from a Shia minority community in Kabul, and most of his fellow villagers were apostates and had converted to Christianity many years ago."

"Then why does he call himself Taliban?"

"Good question," Ted Saunders said. "I asked him that. And he said that his tribe hated Afghan Muslims, so when they were offered a job by a German mercenary group, and were ordered to wear Taliban dresses and wrap turbans and pretend to be jihadi leaders, he and his friends were happy to oblige."

"How much money were those Afghan men paid to pretend to be Taliban?" I asked.

"He said they were promised millions of American dollars," Saunders told me.

"I see. I hope they don't think that the U.S. government is finding them, because the Italian man is really doing all of these crimes. He is part of the U.S. military, but the government has no idea that he is betraying the United States and creating fake terrorist organizations in Afghanistan."

The American Army Counterintelligence officer nodded. "The Italian-American man, Baldassarre Bastico and his German friends work together in this criminal organization. They hate Muslims and want to destroy the religion of Islam from the world. This is one of the reasons the Italian-American army commander helped his friend make the ISIS terrorist group in Syria and Iraq. He personally created the fake Taliban group and is using these European criminals to commit crimes and blame it on the Muslims."

"No one would believe them, right?" I asked worriedly. "I mean, they blew up buildings and kill innocent people, and frame it on innocent Arabs and Afghans, but everyone would realize that it was European criminals who did this."

"No, the Italian naval commander is very smart. He used his paratroopers and army special ops soldiers from the United States Army to detonate huge bombs and kill innocent civilians around the world, and then forces some Muslims to make a video shouting Alla and Mahomet and show the American and British newspapers that Muslim terrorist groups did all the crimes. But the criminals who actually did those crimes were not Muslims. They were all Israelis, French, Bulgarian, Romanian, Italian and German criminals, along with many British and American soldiers who work for the Italian Naval commander."

"Why doesn't he ever get caught or arrested?" I asked curiously.

"The Italian man uses several old tricks while detonating all those building and important government and military bases across America and Europe," Ted Saunders explained. "He always frames other people for his dirty work."

"What do you mean?" I asked Saunders.

Saunders looked very calm person. He doesn't look capable of cracking a joke. "Recently, he made his agents kill and poison several famous Russian politicians and journalists."

"You mean the journalists who were speaking critically of the Russian president? Everyone believed that the Russian president had them killed and poisoned."

The Army Counterintelligence officer nodded. "Yes, the Italian man always does that. He killed several outspoken opponents of the Russian president, and made it look as though the Russian president killed them."

"Why is he framing the Russian leader for all those crimes?" I inquired.

Saunders sighed before replying. "He threatened the Russian president to give him access to many natural resources in Moscow and the Novgorod, but the Russian president refused, so he took revenge by executing many Russian reporters, political activists and bloggers. And he told the world media that the Russian premier was behind it."

"Wow. It is a very cunning move. By killing anyone who speaks critically or negatively about the Russian premier, he is making it look like the Russian leader ordered those assassinations."

"Yes, that is exactly how he wants the world to see these killings." The United States Army Counterintelligence said. "This is the reason why we need to stop this Italian man and arrest his German friends before they kill any more Russian politicians."

ONE MONTH LATER

My friend Viktor Schluter entered our makeshift office minutes before sunrise. He was wearing the usual dark wool trench coat and walked stiffly alongside his beloved of Schatzi. The German Saarloos wolfdog had been Viktor's companion since he had arrived in America and we reluctantly allowed the dog to become another member of our small team.

"Breakfast?" Viktor handed me a medium sized paper bag.

I looked quizzically at him. No one had ever brought me breakfast before.

I didn't expect him to be so considerate.

"It's a garlic bagel," my German friend smiled faintly. "And black coffee."

"Thanks, man." I was touched.

Viktor handed me the bag and walked over to his wolfdog. He gave Schatzi a small bone shaped toy and settled her in a corner.

"I got another alert this morning," Joe announced.

I was sipping on the coffee my Viktor had brought me but abandoned the beverage before approaching Joe's computer desk. I knew how jittery the hacker got if someone strayed too near with a drink. His gadgets were his life and he was determined to protect those.

"What kind of alert?" I said casually.

"Ever since you got out of the black site," Joe replied without glancing up, "I installed a software over global internet traffic. It can monitor a host of thing."

"What does your software look for?" I inquired.

"Key words, phrases," the computer hacker explained. "Filters emails, text messages, coded transmissions. And when it identifies a threat, it notifies me. According to my alerts, this woman is definitely a target." He displayed a life-sized image on the screen of his mega computer.

I studied the woman's face. She had a soft round face and stick-straight blond hair and wore an off-the-shoulder, floral-print blazer. "Who is she?"

"Clarissa Shetland. She works as a senior generator technician at the Burlington Nuclear Generating Station."

Viktor cleared his throat. "Where is the station located?"

"Two miles north of Lake Ontario."

"It's in Canada?"

"Yeah, our would-be-victim is Canadian. She lives several blocks from the nuclear power station."

"Any idea why someone wants her dead?" Viktor asked in his usual hoarse voice. He was peering into the screen. "She doesn't look like a person who would make a lot of enemies."

I addressed the hacker. "What about her background? Someone from her past may want her dead."

"She's from French Québec. Educated at the Université Laval in Québec City. After graduating with honors, she went on to join the nuclear power plant as a senior technician. Oh, I don't know if it is relevant, but according to our file on her, during her university days, Shetland was a member of a white-nationalist movement."

"Can you remotely access her phone?"

"Already on it." Joe said. "There. I cloned her phone. Now we get a call every time she gets a call. Her messages are going to pop up on- well, that depends? John or Viktor?"

I frowned lightly. "There is still the source of the volatility virus that infected Wall Street. The one that fueled a mammoth stock market slide. I haven't narrowed down the perpetrator yet."

"You stay in New York and find out who was responsible," Viktor suggested. "I will head to Canada and try to keep the woman safe."

Joe nodded. "Now that this has been cleared, I'm starting to get live feed. Her last text messages- they are being diverted to your phone, Viktor. It came from one of her colleagues at the power station. His Facebook and twitter updates show that he is an alt-right propagandist."

"He wants to meet her after work," I read the text message.

"Nothing unusual about co-workers catching up," Joe observed.

"But if someone is trying to kill her, we need to know who and neutralize the threat." I said, decidedly. "Viktor, how soon can you be in Ontario?"

"By noon today," the former German special force operative assured us. "I'll contact you once the threat has been eliminated."

Viktor Schluter had left his dog in my custody, but although I took great care to ensure I had all the necessary supplies to look after the canine, the animal was uncooperative and restless. On the second day, I grew concerned over Schatzi's lack of appetite and called Viktor. I asked him what I should do for his pet dog.

Viktor Schluter did not seem alarmed. He merely asked me to put the dog on the phone. Thinking it was a joke, I complied. Viktor spoke to his German Wolfdog in *Deutsch*. The moment he uttered *Bleib*, Schatzi plopped obediently at my feet. I realized then that Viktor's dog understood only German. It was not a wonder that she was grumpy and disinclined to obey my instructions. The remaining week passed tolerantly. I gave Viktor a brief call each night so he could talk Schatzi to sleep.

Viktor returned from Canada nine days later. His mission had taken longer than either of us anticipated. As part of his cover, he managed to get himself as Clarissa Shetland's bodyguard. After Viktor foiled the third attempt on her life and incapacitated the assailants, she was impressed and offered him the job. It provided a suitable cover for him and allowed him to stay close and protect her. Viktor accompanied the generator technician to her work place at the Burlington Nuclear Generating Station and ensured that she was unharmed.

While guarding her, Viktor had learned that the woman was targeted because she had attempted to prevent an unsanctioned data transfer that was supposed to leak classified information to an alien server. Two of her colleagues tried to abduct her but that was successfully thwarted by the former KSK operative. We were pleased to be able to save another person's life and I was grateful for having Viktor with me to shoulder partial responsibility for the seemingly unattainable goal of keeping billions of civilians safe.

Five weeks later, I received a message on my long defunct email address. I had used it only once during an operation in the Pankow locality of East Berlin. The Colonel had sent me to eliminate a threat, but I ended up saving the target's life and supplied him with documents and travel papers. The target also memorized and email address. I told him to use it in case he needed me. Today, the message beeped and I knew who the sender was.

"I need you to run this through your facial recognition software."

"Who is it?" The hacker chewed his gum absently and proceeded to type in commands on his keyboard.

I thought carefully before replying. "A friend who needs help."

The Caltech grad nodded coolly. "Location is on the way. Check your email."

"Thanks."

Meanwhile, Joe printed out another sheet of paper and handed it to me. There were eleven names on it.

"What is it?" I tried to find familiar names but it appeared random.

"I used digital identity verification via my screening app and flagged these individuals. They are in some serious danger."

"All of them?" I said, incredulously. "Can you be more specific?"

"Afraid not. They come from polar opposite backgrounds. It could take me days to compile a personality profile on each. And even if I did, you and Viktor can cover only two of them. Who's going to protect the rest?"

"Good question," I said and placed a police badge on the table. "Give this to Viktor when he gets here. He'll be an NYPD detective for the next seventy-two hours."

"How did you get this?" Joe sputtered.

"Let's just say I had a friend at the precinct who owed me a favor. Oh, don't forget to give the list to Viktor. He'll have ample resources at hand to protect those fellows."

"What about you?"

"What about me?" I retorted, slightly annoyed for the delay.

"You are leaving early." Joe said pointedly. "I just thought it's odd."

"Got to run some errand. Don't worry. I'll be fine."

“Privyet, Slava!” I exchanged greetings with Vyacheslav Puzanov, my old associate from Russia.

“Ah, I was thinking when I would see you.” The middle-aged, handsome, grey-bearded man shook my hand warmly before leading me to his office.

For the past decade, he had been an independent consultant for the Federal Security Service and helped me with solving a number of cases at the Agency.

I nodded. “I saw the ad on this week’s issue of *Krasnaya Zvezda*. Are you in trouble, my friend?”

“Personally? No.” Vyacheslav frowned suddenly. “But I needed your expertise. To be precise, SVR needs answers.”

“SVR?” I repeated. “Have you already been promoted to Russia’s external intelligence agency? I should congratulate you.”

Vyacheslav smiled sadly. “I am here for work. There has been an incident.”

I couldn’t hide the curiosity on my face.

“Yury Reshetnikov, an SVR agent was found dead in his office, shot multiple times from the back.” Vyacheslav said heavily. “It’s a huge loss for Russia.”

“Have they found the perpetrator?”

Vyacheslav shook his head. “*Spetsgruppа А* is running the investigations. One of their agents recovered the body.”

“I’ve never heard of this group.”

“It is stand-alone sub unit of the FSB’s special purpose center. American’s would consider it a counter-terrorism task force.”

“FSB don’t have any leads?”

“They do, but as you know, the American bureaucracy can be very severe so our investigation is being hampered.” Vyacheslav sighed. “I know you still have contacts within the Agency. It would mean a lot if you looked into the murder and let us know. His family needs closure.”

“Family?”

“Yes, Yury left a wife and nineteen-year-old daughter. She is beginning university this year.”

“Where are they?”

“In FBI custody. You see, this is the part that makes no sense. A day before Yury died, he logged into his SVR webpage and used his access codes to download a series of data. Most of it was scrambled but we got snippets of it. He was looking for all the secret prison location along the eastern seaboard. Hours before he was shot, he also left a message to his brother, who is my colleague at the FSB.”

“What did Yury tell his brother?”

“The message was cryptic, but we have decoded it. It mentions that his wife and daughter was being held at a CIA black site and he was working out a plan to get them out. Twice, he referenced a woman. An attractive brunette who promised to break his family out if he gave her the list of locations.” The Russian agent looked distressed. “We don’t understand why he would lie to his own brother.”

“Wait. Are you saying Yury’s family was never in a CIA black site prison?”

“Never. They were in FBI custody. But after he died.”

“Where were they before that?”

“I personally interviewed his Yury’s wife. She said a woman, an American woman, identified herself as an FBI agent and escorted the two of them to a secure location and told them it was a witness protection safehouse. The woman promised them they could go home in a day, but couldn’t contact anyone in those hours. I think someone inside the US government had something to do with Yury’s death. I need to know who and why he was killed.”

“I’ll look into it, Slava,” I promised my friend.

When I returned to Joe’s computer lab, he was preparing a set of ID cards for Viktor.

“How’d your trip go?” The hacker wanted to know.

I gave him the details of the investigation and asked him to retrieve CCTV footage of all personnel and visitors to Yury Reshetnikov’s office.

“A murder investigation of a Russian spy?” Joe asked. “Isn’t that the kind of thing FBI was supposed to handle?”

“There may be a mole inside the Bureau,” I informed my tech op. “I’m doing this as a favor. Besides, something is off with this whole scenario. Why would an American agent lie to an FSB officer about his wife and daughter’s whereabouts and persuade him to steal data from the Central Intelligence Agency?”

The computer expert frowned deeply. “You did say they were after the location of all the black sites along the Eastern Seaboard?”

“Yes,” I answered slowly. “What are you thinking?”

“I think the best place to start is finding out who are being held there.”

My brain raced to process the line of thought. “Good. I like where your head is at. Someone related to one of the high-profile ghost detainees may be behind this stunt. Joe, you can rule out the CIA. Agency officers would have contacts in the prison sites because most of the secret facilities inside the United States are controlled directly by the CIA black ops units. That leaves us with senior FBI agents, elite tactical unit leaders and even the deputy director.”

“Okay, this will take some time. I’ll check their alibis for the time of the murder and check if anyone has friends or relatives in one of the black sites.”

As Joe spoke, several red alert boxes flashed on the top of his computer screen. “What is that?”

“An alert,” Joe peered into his screen. “Wait. The satellite I had re-tasked over Illinois captured a distress signal near Chicago’s west side neighborhood.”

“Zoom in,” I urged him.

“There. Nothing much except a single structure. It is a nondescript warehouse. What’s so special about it?” The computer whiz wondered aloud.

I didn’t reply.

I had seen those structures before. It was one of those secret sites where Americans accused of terrorism are held against their will. Detainees are kept shackled for prolonged periods and are denied access to basic constitutional rights. I knew because I had been in one of these.

I made a brief phone call to my contact at the Agency. He confirmed what I had suspected all along. There has been a jail break. A ghost detainee escaped from the black site in Chicago.

Swearing me to secrecy, my friend at the NSA confirmed the identity of the prisoner. It was Richard!

Cynthia’s stepfather had escaped. And he had outside help. Seven CIA officers were killed. A massive manhunt was underway but there was no trace of the escapee.

I knew if Richard was as resourceful as before, the CIA would never be able to find him. He had proven himself to be remarkably elusive. Yury Reshetnikov’s death also began to make sense. Someone in the Bureau had used the Russian SVR agent to obtain the blue prints on all the black sites inside the United States, so they could break out Richard from government custody.

I was brainstorming on who could have broken Richard out of the secure holding site, but no suspects came to mind. Then a conversation played in my mind. It was a phone call. From Cynthia. She had called my old number which was officially disabled but was still rerouted to my personal line. I could not fathom why she would suddenly contact me. Our relationship had become frosty after I escaped from the black site. I found it hard to forgive how she betrayed me and handed me over to the Agency even though I proclaimed my innocence and assured her I was being framed for the bombings.

Cynthia, of course, did not believe me and held me at gun point until DHS agents escorted me to their ghost base. There, the torture began. It was the worst months of my life. I wallowed in self-pity and fear, but somehow, I did not feel any anger towards my beloved Cynthia. I knew she still loved me, and it was her sense of strict righteousness that made her act this way. She always followed the rules and obeyed orders. I appreciated the fact that she was willing to turn me in, a man who loved her unconditionally, merely because she believed I was a criminal. Cynthia was a good person with an angelic heart. But often, she fell victim to her stepfather’s manipulations and made decisions that harmed her or those she loved.

In the dark ghost site, I had remained sane by thinking of the love Cynthia and I felt for each other. For years, we had been inseparable. When I had arrived in America, it was Cynthia’s immense charm and uncommon grace that attracted me to her and made me fall in love.

When I answered Cynthia’s call, I did not know what to say. I felt anger, guilt, love, and hate all at once. Her father had been in DOJ custody for two months and we had hardly kept in touch except meeting once at an NSA briefing room. Cynthia was accompanied by a man who looked vaguely familiar.

Simon Devlin. He worked at the Agency’s Clandestine Services and was chief of the interrogation team at Detention Site Echo, one of the most notorious secret black sites the CIA had built. It also happened to be where I was kept for the duration of my captivity. It was Devlin who had personally monitored the torture and ordered his men to apply all of CIA’s enhanced interrogation techniques on me. This included - but was by no means limited to - walling, stress positions, cramped confinement, white noise, waterboarding and sleep deprivation.

On that occasion, I had temporarily abandoned niceties and pulled her aside. “What are you doing with him?” I whispered angrily, jerking my head at Devlin’s direction.

"It's Simon. He asked me on a date." Cynthia blinked rapidly. Her eyes were still full of life and looked great for her age. She looked the same as I remembered years ago except at the age of fifty-four, a handful of fine wrinkles adorned those beautiful eyes and her broad cheeks sagged slightly due to age. Cynthia was still speaking to me. "I thought I should go out- to forget all the-"

I lowered my voice and whispered wretchedly. "Cynthia, how could you even agree to go out with him? Simon Devlin was the one who authorized the torture. He gave the orders to the other interrogators to starve me for weeks, and dangle hamburgers just out of my arm's reach so that I would suffer. On his orders, I was locked inside stand-alone concrete box for days. He is sick. How could you be with him after seeing what he did to me?"

"Simon mentioned you but he said he didn't personally carry out the electrocutions."

"Devlin *ordered* and sanctioned it." I said bluntly.

"John, he expressed remorse. I know it's not enough but Simon *was* doing his job. He's not a bad person."

"I can't believe this," my throat constricted so painfully that I couldn't form any words.

"Look, I know this is hard for you," Cynthia softened her tone. "But Simon said he loves me. And ever since dad was placed in the black site, I felt that having Simon around helps me understand what it is like. He knows how the secret prisons work. I needed him, John."

I nodded, unable to speak, and left the briefing room.

I didn't expect her to get in touch with me merely weeks after that encounter.

Now that she was on the line, past memories flooded my mind. I was gripping the cell phone so tightly that my knuckles became white. "How are you?" I managed.

"I'm okay, I think." Cynthia spoke in her sweet voice. "Gérald- he's someone I've been seeing- he is a good man and has been taking care of me."

She was referring to her latest boyfriend, Gérald Sarközy, a French Intelligence officer based in Los Angeles. "We are happy now. But I miss my daddy."

"Richard needs to answer for his crimes, Cynthia. You heard him at the hearing, didn't you? He admitted to killing dozens of CIA agents. He said he was behind the attack on the FBI building in Hanover. He deserves to be locked up."

Cynthia sniffed audibly. I thought she was crying. "I know my dad did a lot of terrible and unforgivable things, to American citizens, to you. But he loved me, and he still loves me, John. I can't just sit here and let him rot in prison."

"He'll get a fair trial," I said curtly. "Listen, when you handed me over to the black site, they tortured me endlessly."

"Please, John, I only did it because I thought you had actually bombed those places, the Paris shooting. Daddy showed me the evidence."

"I know, I know that. And I don't blame you for trying to do what you thought was the right thing. But you should know that I was electrocuted and waterboarded more times than I could count. You know why? Because I was Russian. The government classified me as an enemy combatant. They said I had no rights. No identity. I did not have the luxury of an open hearing and fair trial. I didn't even have access to an attorney. Richard has a lot more privilege than I ever had. He was the one who framed me for his crimes. I wouldn't feel sorry for him." I said, with finality in my voice.

"Wait, John, I really needed to tell you this. I spoke with the Justice Department. Dad's plea deal may not be binding. The deputy attorney general was pretty clear on that. He told me they might seek the death penalty." Cynthia's voice broke.

"I'm sorry," I said after a long minute, "but I don't see what I can do."

"I need to get him out of there, John," she insisted.

"Cynthia, it was *you* who wanted to turn Richard in. You knew about his crimes, how he hurt innocent people. How can you even consider violating at least fifteen federal laws to break a convicted terrorist out?"

"He's my daddy," Cynthia pleaded. "I thought the plea deal would protect him from prosecution, but I was wrong. Gérald Sarközy and I talked about this. He wants to meet my dad before- before it's too late."

"Even if I wanted to help you, Cynthia" I answered, "I couldn't. It's impossible to break someone out of a black site. For two reasons. One. No one knows which location a detainee is being interrogated at. Second. Those facilities are heavily guarded and have numerous subterranean panic rooms that seal itself if an attempt is made to breach the perimeters."

Cynthia thanked me and ended the call.

I did not think much about that conversation but now that Richard had escaped from CIA custody, I began to consider the possibility that she may have been somehow related to the jail break.

I dialed Joe's personal number and left a message. I asked the hacker to track Cynthia's movement for the past week, including the time during Yuri Reshetnikov's murder. It did not look like a coincidence that the Russian SVR agent would be killed only a day after he downloaded the location of the CIA secret prisons. Incidentally, the location of the black site in which Richard was being held was also on that list.

My tech op got back to me sooner than I expected.

"You'll want to sit down for this," the hacker announced.

"Just tell me what you found."

"Well, I back traced all of Yuri Reshetnikov's emails, phone calls and tracked all the visitors he had from a week prior to his death. I've found the identity of the attractive American Yuri was telling his brother about." Joe clicked on a small image and enlarged it on his screen.

It was a still shot of Cynthia and the Russian agent. They appeared to be holding hands.

"Are you sure it's her? Cynthia?"

Joe pursed his lips and slid his fingers over the screen. "The day before. Here, I took the liberty of capturing a shot from a hidden camera in Yuri's bedroom. Looks like your girlfriend was having a serious affair with a SVR agent."

"It doesn't make sense," I muttered.

"Makes perfect sense to me," Joe countered. "Your girl wanted to bust her dad out of jail, right? But she's FBI and doesn't have access to Agency servers, so who does she go to? A Russian agent who could use his SVR resources to tap into the agency's Counterterrorism Center database. She probably makes out with him to get close and persuade him to get the intel; the exact locations and blueprints of CIA's black sites- everything she needs to break him out."

"No, Cynthia is not like that. She's not the kind of woman who uses people. She--"

"I know you two have history, but the pictures aren't lying, John."

"I didn't realize she was so desperate to get Richard out of prison," I observed quietly.

"About that," Joe said haltingly, "I might have an idea why."

"I hope you're not going to toss another unsubstantial theory," I said, collapsing on one of his inflatable couches.

"I checked the Justice Department's sealed files on Richard. It looks like they seriously considered the death penalty."

"Are you certain?"

Joe nodded. "I found a copy Richard's final will and testament. It's standard for death row inmates to complete their wills. The inmates get a chance to nominate executors, nominate guardians for their minor children, and state what beneficiaries should receive which portions of their estate."

"I assume you looked through Richard's files?"

"Yeah, but I was a little confused. He had two separate wills. One prior to being arrested. And one he drafted two weeks ago."

"What did he change?"

"His previous will leaves the entirety of his estate to his daughter Cynthia. I didn't know that old man was so rich. His fortune is worth over two billion euros."

"The change?"

"Well, in the final will, he cut off Cynthia's name completely. Everything now belongs to several hundred entities, charities and banks. The old dude had some drastic change of heart."

"It is unusual," I said slowly. "Richard loved Cynthia- I never doubted that, but why would he remove her from his will?"

"Does he know it was his daughter who got him arrested?" Joe inquired.

I nodded. "Cynthia convinced Richard to turn himself in. She personally drove him to the attorney general's office."

"Well, that explains why daddy got mad at baby girl. When he realized that he would get the death penalty, he didn't want to give all his wealth away to the one person who sent him to the gallows."

"It was not Cynthia's fault. She thought she was doing the right thing."

"Yeah, I'm sure," the hacker mumbled. "Once your girlfriend found out her daddy removed her name from the will, she decided to break him out. If he died, she would have got nothing. Not a cent."

"Come on, Joe, you don't know Cynthia like I do," I protested. "She wouldn't do this for money. I believe Cynthia loved her father and wanted to get him out. Period."

Joe didn't argue with me afterwards.

The hacker was brilliant but he could never understand Cynthia. She was a complicated woman whose heart was full of unrestricted love. I admired her devotion to her father. I knew she was not a materialist person. The Cynthia I knew did not care about wealth and

power. She cared only about love. I knew if she broke Richard out of prison, it was because she believed, despite all his evilness, that he loved her.

Joe may have been partially correct. After the Justice Department approved Richard's death sentence, he finally gave up his persistent obsession over Cynthia and decided to leave her off his will. Prior to the execution date, Cynthia's lawyers informed her of the latest developments and she hastened to put together a plan to get him out of CIA custody. Perhaps, Cynthia had wanted to rescue Richard and persuade him to reinstate her as his sole heir but I believe that too was an act of charity. She wanted the money not for herself, but for her children. I knew at least two of her children lived with her or resided in estates owned by her. She was fiercely protective and loving mother and would have done anything to give her children a better life.

Back in 1995, when I had been falsely accused of manslaughter and imprisoned in death row, Cynthia and I kept in touch via letters and occasional visits. Soon after, my fate turned. It seemed as though the future held surprises for me and I was able to return to Cynthia's arms, innocent and alive.

It was many months after I was acquitted and released that Cynthia took me to a daycare center located next to her house. Two identical twins were lying in a handsome crib. The beautiful baby boys looked no older than six months. When I asked Cynthia who these children belonged to, she broke down into tears and told me how she became pregnant during my absence and decided to keep the baby because she thought I would be executed anyway. She delivered the twins only days before I was released from the federal penitentiary. When I wanted to know who the father was, Cynthia claimed she had gone to a bar one night and in a drunken frenzy, ended up in the back of the bartender's car and got pregnant. I was a little surprised because it was unlike my Cynthia to have one-night stand with strangers, so I cross examined her. She finally admitted passing out that night. A few weeks later, she felt ill and went to see her physician who confirmed her pregnancy. The doctors also said having an abortion would risk her life and possibly kill her.

Cynthia was besotted with her infants and it made me proud to see how devoted a mother she was. But there was a constant uneasiness lingering on my mind. Who was the children's father? Cynthia didn't recall particularly having sex; she merely assumed she had.

What if there was another explanation? I removed two cotton pieces from my pocket and swished the cotton swabs around their mouths. After sealing it in a tube, I mailed the DNA samples to a private lab along with another test result I had done several years earlier. I received the DNA paternity test results within three business days.

It was a match. The results showed that Richard was the child's biological father. I knew that Richard had on previous occasion extracted ovulating eggs from his stepdaughter and fathered dozens of children from Cynthia via vitro fertilization. He hired many local and foreign women to act as surrogates but kept those children hidden from Cynthia. When I located the medical laboratory where this bizarre practice was taking place, I was stunned. I brought Cynthia with me and showed her the nursery. The underground lab was also filled with incubators and tubes. A technician admitted to us that they were in the process of fertilizing another batch of mature eggs by a specific sperm that they had in store. Cynthia was so infuriated by this act that she destroyed the entire lab to prevent her eggs to be used in such a criminal manner.

On that occasion, I hid the results of the paternity test results from her. I knew it would be heartbreaking for Cynthia to learn that the man she considered to be her father all her life was in fact using her DNA to father children of his own. I told Cynthia that we didn't have a positive identification on who the father was but she saw the lab report that confirmed that those infants in the nursery were in fact her biological children. I had quizzed Cynthia intensively about how someone could have taken her eggs without her knowledge and she suggested that it may have something to do with an operation she had to undergo at the direction of her family physician, who told Cynthia that her ovary needed to be partially removed. Clearly, Richard used Cynthia's ovarian surgery as a pretext to enable the surrogate birth of those children.

However, the incident in 1995 was more shocking for me, because this time, her stepfather did not merely use her eggs to give birth to children via IVF, but he had the audacity to actually inject his sperm into her body and force her to undergo a dangerous pregnancy she never consented to.

After my release from prison, I was concerned to see Richard's obsession with Cynthia, but I also understood that he loved her too much to let her go. He saw me as the enemy because he felt that I would take the joy out of his life by moving away with his stepdaughter who he had always insisted was his own child. Rather than hate Richard, I tried to understand him. For years, the old man was in the intelligence trade. Numerous times, he was arrested and tortured by foreign and domestic intelligence agencies. Many of his old friends and colleagues had betrayed him. When Cynthia's mother left him only five years after their marriage, Richard was devastated. He often told me stories about his late wife Ekaterina. Richard would tell me how his love for Ekaterina was transferred to Cynthia, the pride and joy of his life. He was alive because of this daughter. I did not doubt he loved her and now, seeing to what lengths Cynthia had gone to break him out of prison, despite having full knowledge of his guilt, I did not resent her for being devoted to him.

The twins she gave birth to in early 1996 were now college going boys. Their education must have cost a fortune. I knew Cynthia would want to look after her children and ensure they were financially secure. If she thought Richard would reinstate her name as the heir to his vast fortune, then who could blame the mother for doing everything in her power to possess that money? I was certain that she was also trying to provide for all the surrogate children that were born with her DNA. It was a costly endeavor.

She was a good mother. I could not punish her for that.

I decided not to pursue Cynthia's lead and busied myself with saving the lives of civilians inside US cities who were in danger.

Viktor Schluter was still in Canada when another major terror attack jolted the nation. There had been three bombings and a deadly shoot-out within the span of six days in this tri-state area and my computer expert tapped into the security footages and pointed out to me that the alleged shooter who was killed during the ensuing firefight was in fact a veteran of the United States Armed Forces.

"How do you know this?" I asked the British hacker.

"I ran his picture through every biometric recognition scan I have access to and the result was the same," Joe replied.

"You found his real name?"

"He is Christopher Ross. An army corporal. Served two tours in Afghanistan. KIA from an IED explosion."

"Killed in action?" I repeated my question. "You are certain about this?"

Joe nodded. "Positive. But that is the official story. Christopher Ross obviously didn't die in Kabul because this photo shows him gunning down three police officers in Los Angeles."

"But his eyes are glassy," I commented, studying the video footage of the shoot-out. "Ross looks off. Could his actions be a result of PTSD?"

"I doubt it," Joe replied instantly. "His military record was stellar. His army file says he was a model recruit, with no history of insubordination. And even if you tried to explain away his shoot-out as a bout of PTSD, what about Jeremy Hines, the Michigan-based television reported who was killed in a fire nine months ago. His body was never recovered, but the State declared him dead. Jeremy Hines was being held by Norfolk Dynamics for six months and had undergone psychological damage from unsanctioned chemical experiments. This is where he shows up. This was taken in April. The guy is setting fire to Lafayette National Park in Wisconsin. Two-hundred-seventy acres of forest burned in that intense forest fire."

"Why would an academic burn down a national park?" I wondered aloud. "It doesn't make any sense."

"That is because he has been programmed."

"Programmed? How?"

"I tracked down the EMT personnel who rescued Ross from the field. They worked for a private research company called the Norfolk Dynamics. The same company employees were the first responders when Jeremy Hines died in that fire."

"The real question should be why did Norfolk Dynamics use an ordinary journalist like Hines to start a forest fire that would wreck hundreds of acres?"

"I doubt Norfolk Dynamic have much say in the matter. They are the machine builders, weapon manufacturers- they design the soldiers, program them into killers, and sell their products to the highest bidders."

I couldn't hide my astonishment. "Joe, how do you know all this? I thought you were merely beginning the research on this incident."

"Well, I took the liberty of reaching out to Viktor. You see, he was already in Canada, so I asked him to look into a facility near the North Dakota border crossing because one of the shooters was wearing a shirt purchased from a supermarket in Estevan, a city that is only eight miles north of the Canada-United States border. I assumed he was living there."

"You did well," I commended the young hacker. "What did Viktor find out after inspecting the Canadian facility?"

"The company, Norfolk Dynamics, is headquartered in Saskatchewan, Canada, and it is where they held their test subjects- virtually, prisoners. Viktor found evidence that showed that Christopher Ross and Jeremy Hines were both held in that laboratory before being shipped to the United States. They were sold to separate customers."

"Customers?" I stifled a gasp. "Who were the buyers?"

"They function like a modern-day slave market. Norfolk Dynamics sell their products- or as their inventory had listed- subject, to a broad clientele. Entrepreneurs, politicians, drug or weapon smugglers- their customer list is vast. But word is that they don't sell their products to just anyone; only those they can vet personally are allowed to submit offers in a closed bidding system. And of course, the subjects are custom made, tailored to the need of the buyers."

"You mentioned several soldiers were rescued from Norfolk Dynamics prison cells. Did they all die from IED explosions?"

The British hacker paused. "Most did. And their nationalities vary. According to the log book which Viktor recovered from their hard drive in the Canadian facility, Norfolk Dynamics sold a subject to a buyer based in Madrid."

"When?"

"The sale date was March 3, 2004. One week later, a series of bombs were detonated across the Cercanías commuter train system of Madrid. Officially, some Middle Eastern terror network claimed responsibility but these files prove that Norfolk Dynamics was personally responsible for creating and delivering the alleged bomber or attacker to Spain. The subject was a forty-year-old male who supposedly died in an IED explosion in Baghdad a year earlier."

"You found all this in the hard drive?" I wanted to ascertain.

"From what was left of their computer system," the hacker said unhappily. "When Viktor stormed into the Norfolk Dynamics facility, they figured out the game was over so they left the place in a hurry, destroying all the evidence behind them. Luckily, Viktor salvaged the damaged hard drives and mailed them to me."

"Any specific reason as to why the victim-subject in Baghdad died in an IED?"

"The IED explosions were ideal cover for them. It made it harder for medics to recover body parts and uniformed Norfolk Dynamics employees on site would hurriedly remove the actual bodies and leave traces of DNA for the rescue party."

"What about all the soldiers who were also killed in those IED attacks? If the military declared him deceased, on what grounds did they announce that?"

"They identified the victims from their dental and tissue samples, which the Norfolk Dynamic crooks left plenty behind for the corpsman to recover. In the last two years, the coalition forces suffered eighteen casualties- all from IED explosions."

"That means Norfolk Dynamics has at least a dozen extra patients to experiment on. We need to find their base of operation. Connect me on a direct line with Viktor." I instructed my tech op.

Joe hurriedly complied and called Viktor on a secure line.

I thanked my German friend for undertaking such a colossal risk and neutralizing the illegal resting facility near the U.S.-Canada border, but Viktor brushed aside my gratitude and reported that he obtained vital intel from a lab technician who was working in the facility.

"This wasn't the only laboratory this company had built, John," the former German special force commando warned me. "When I infiltrated the facility in the Canadian city, I discovered carefully disguised motion-sensing camera traps in the perimeter zone that were set to capture trespassers. It was a nuisance but the traps slowed me down. I saw a man escape through a hidden chute. I was unable to capture him but was able to take a photo. His image has been forwarded to you and Joe. The lab assistant I interrogated told me he was in charge of the test subjects so I need to apprehend him and ask questions."

I nodded to Joe and motioned for him to run a trace on the missing person Viktor had mentioned. A minute later, Joe printed a sheet and lay it on the table. It was a mugshot of a man named Taylor Stokes.

"Where is Taylor Stokes now?" Viktor demanded.

Joe answered. "NSA handed him over to the FBI."

"The FBI?"

"He was captured on U.S. soil," I explained to my friend, "so it's their jurisdiction. Apparently, after escaping from you, Stokes crossed the border into the United States."

"Are the federal agents charging him with anything?"

"Yes," Joe informed him. "Taylor Stokes will be facing charges on over sixty counts ranging from bribery to sex trafficking to first-degree sexual assault and kidnapping. The world will have one less bad guy to worry about because he will spend the rest of his life behind bars for sure."

"It doesn't bring back the lives he destroyed," Viktor said quietly. "The dozens of victims- who lost their memories, forgot their identities permanently- their lives are never going to be the same."

"Hopefully, with the right kind of therapy, they will recover past memories." Joe tried to display a cheerful face and addressed me. "Weren't you also abducted a long time ago? You didn't have much recollection of the time but eventually recovered memories?"

"I was different. When I was in the Soviet training camp, the Colonel regularly placed the recruits under hypnosis in an effort to train us to withstand brainwashing. I had built-in defenses."

Viktor's voice floated in from the phone. "What happened to the other subjects Norfolk Dynamics sold recently?"

Joe proceeded to type in several commands on his computer before responding. "I don't how recent this might be considered, but one of their victims, resurfaced after disappearing for eleven months, and shot at a two-term state senator from a point-blank range. The

Sheriff disarmed him and took him to custody, but the man claimed to have no recollection of the shooting incident. He had no idea why he would try to kill a man.”

“Where is he now?”

“In a psychiatric ward of the Tuskegee Hospital.”

“I can fly to the hospital and examine the patient,” Viktor suggested.

“You had completed a brutal mission, Viktor,” I reassured the former KSK operative, “but you are in Canada. It will be a lot easier for me to go and check out the survivor. I’ll keep you updated.”

After Viktor ended the call, Joe informed me that the facility in Canada held only nine patients at a time, so it could not have been their only command center.

“They probably have a larger facility hidden somewhere; a place large enough to hold scores of captives.” Joe stated.

“How many accidents in the United States reported Norfolk Dynamic EMT personnel to be the first responders?” I inquired.

“Dozens this year alone. Could be more.”

I muttered under my breath. “Which means all the supposed victims are alive.”

“Worse than alive; they are being subjected to inhumane testing and experiments.” Joe remarked with feelings. “Aside from kidnapping soldiers who were killed in action, this group also took numerous children from United States and Canada.”

“Dreadful.” I suppressed a sigh and asked Joe to contact the psychiatric ward of the Tuskegee Hospital and request an appointment with the patient that was in quarantine.

“You are in luck,” the hacker said after several minutes. “Do you remember lieutenant general Claiborne?”

“Yes, he was a nice old man. Dustin and I rescued him from a hostage crisis in Belgrade.”

“Yeah, he is now chief of the United States Senate liaison division for the Secretary of the Army. The lieutenant general is in Tuskegee now. I informed him of your arrival and he said he will be happy to give you security clearance for the entire ward.”

“Thanks, Joe. I better not keep lieutenant general Claiborne waiting then.”

Unlike institutionalized brick-faced boxes, Tuskegee Hospital looked like a five-star hotel. The security waved me in and a uniformed serviceman escorted me directly to the psychiatric ward. The patients room was not a enclosed cuboid, but was spacious with wall-to-wall windows and beds fitted with wide flat-screen TV monitors.

Lieutenant general Claiborne recognized me at once and waved me to a seat outside the glass window of a patient. “It’s good to see you, John. I see you are still in the business of rescuing innocent people from the worst possible fate.”

“I’m afraid this time it wasn’t me, sir.” I confessed. “My friend Viktor discovered the web of deceit Norfolk Dynamics have been pulling all these years and he personally busted their headquarters in Canada.”

“Yes, I heard about the German Special force guy. He said you were his inspiration.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Claiborne dismissed my gratitude and introduced me to another man who was examining the comatose patient. “Meet Henry. He will be explaining some of the technical terms for us today.”

I nodded in acknowledgment.

Henry shook my hand briefly with his gloved hand and said, “I am the FBI’s liaison to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.”

“HHS has jurisdiction here?” I blurted out instinctively.

“Yes, because it is a medical emergency.” Henry sounded slightly annoyed.

“Anyway, now that you are here, is there anything you and your friend discovered that the military or the Bureau should know?” Lieutenant General Claiborne looked inquiringly at me.

I swallowed before replying. “My friend Viktor was the first person to infiltrate one of the testing compounds and he confirmed that in Norfolk Dynamics laboratories, people are brainwashed to become arsonists, bombers, shooters. They are trained into becoming robotic assassins, and then the killing machines are sold off to highest bidders- people who want to carry out crimes but do not want it to be linked back to them. But I don’t know any more than you do. Did questioning of this patient yield any results?”

“Not much,” Henry replied, “but we did get our hands on the laboratory he was being held hostage at. We tracked down potential customers and are closely monitoring the situation, but will move in on them once they actually carry out their next purchase.”

“They are just another dirty business thriving online?” I stated.

Lieutenant General Claiborne nodded. “Numerous national and international entities rent or buy people from Norfolk Dynamics, a mercenary trafficking ring based in the city of Weyburn, the tenth-largest city in Saskatchewan, Canada. Like your friend discovered, Norfolk brainwashes and sells subjects to trusted buyers. They cater to the buyer’s specific requirements and needs.”

“Like a custom-made order?” I said.

“They’ll supply a Middle Eastern native for a suicide bombing, a Caucasian male for a supermarket shooting, an army veteran for an arson. Or even a thirteen-year-old to act as a school shooter. Children consist of the majority of their subjects, as they are easier to manipulate.” Lieutenant General Claiborne gestured a page lying on his knees. A child’s unsteady handwriting filled the pages. “This kid we rescued is now eleven years old. When he went missing, he was in third grade.”

I took a sharp breath. “What are they planning to do with American kids?”

“The way Norfolk Dynamics work- anything the buyer seeks, they deliver.” The lieutenant general answered. “Each subject cost a lot of money. They have a preset mindset, which takes a while to program, and is ideal on younger victims; most test subjects have their memory wiped completely but we are hoping these kids will be able to make a complete recovery.”

“They don’t sell to just anyone,” Henry added, “only to people they know like the Blacksand private security operative who purchased the shooter. Most buyers are American based. But some are in Europe. They need to sell subjects to carry out suicide attacks, car bombs, etc.”

“You mentioned veterans.” I turned to the army general. “Where did Norfolk Dynamics get their hand on U.S. veterans?”

“I didn’t say only U.S. veterans.” Claiborne corrected me. “Men who have been in combat. Sergeant Declan Witchell, of the British Royal Marines, died in a road side bomb incident. His body was never recovered, presumably decimated in the blast. And another soldier, Private Nicholas Fraser of the Canadian Armed Forces, also died under similar circumstances. A helicopter crash. Both men were rescued from Norfolk Dynamics testing centers. They were alive and physically healthy. Although preliminary medical examination showed that they have suffered extensive brain damage. Norfolk Dynamics took them into custody after faking their death and conditioned their brains. They transported or transferred subjects to Colgan, which is an unincorporated community in Divide County, North Dakota. We believe the holding facility in North Dakota is their primary base of operations in the United States.”

The FBI’s liaison to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spoke up. “We cross-referenced these children with the missing children list in the United States. Three positive matches here. Mark Croxall, Eric Murphy, Hal Fisher.”

“Were they all returned to their families?” I wanted to know.

“Not all of them have living family members,” Henry replied. “But Mark Croxall is a lucky kid. He is twelve years old now. Was taken at the age of eight. Despite being brainwashed for three years, Mark was able to recognize his father.”

“How did they brainwash the kid?” I pressed.

“The FBI arrested a female psychiatrist.” The FBI’s liaison to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sounded disgusted. “She was responsible for ensuring the younger subjects became malleable. The woman achieved her goal by posing as the mother of those children and encouraging them to espouse violent ideologies. In the case of young Mark, he was being raised in the facility by a woman who was a former military physician and was grooming the abducted children to become suicide bombers and shooters. Mark will be starting seventh grade next year and his school counselor volunteered to counsel and support him to help him deal with his mental state. Outwardly, the kid is normal, but still under effects of brainwashing that may be triggered by particular events. At least, he survived and that is what matters at this point.”

“How many of their victims died so far?”

The lieutenant general interrupted. “Gavin Frost is another soldier who went missing, presumably AWOL, but was in reality kidnapped by the private weapons company. He did not end up as lucky as Mark Croxall. Gavin was forced to gun down the local mayor and then committed suicide. The police recovered a hearing aid in his ear but we now identified it as a remote speaker.”

I asked. “And the children they generally abduct- do they belong to American families?”

“They do kidnap children from American families,” Henry confirmed, “sometimes Canadian and Mexican families as well, but most often, they stick with kids of Asian or Middle Eastern descent. They put the kids through the most sophisticated brainwashing techniques, and train them to become killers. Recently, there have been a surge in activity online. The sale of children has spiked.”

“Why?”

“I checked the clientele list,” the FBI’s liaison to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said thoughtfully. “It seems that there have been thirteen orders for killer children. Or normal kids who have been abducted by Norfolk Dynamics, and trained or brainwashed into becoming suicide bombers or shooters. This company increased programming of young children mainly because the demand for them has spiked.”

I shook my head, trying to register the information in my head. “Why would criminals need to make kids do these dirty works for them?”

“Because it looks natural.” Henry said simply. “People don’t ask too many questions. Even the FBI refuses to investigate a high school shooting which involves underage assailant and victims. They assume it was an individual job, and don’t bother to look for links to terrorist groups.”

“They have been using kids lately, in order to make the crimes look natural.” The lieutenant general looked pained. “And it’s easier to brainwash kids. Some American kids who were trained to pose as children of Middle Eastern fighters were brainwashed into giving false interviews, talk in videos and were trained to blow up bombs if they were approached by international rescue teams.”

My face twisted involuntarily as I thought of those abducted children who were being brainwashed.

The FBI’s liaison to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services continued to speak as if he didn’t notice my anguish. “A British teenager was kidnapped by this group two years ago. She later resurfaced in a gruesome video after claiming responsibility for the attack on a bus station in Leeds. According to the records in Norfolk Dynamics servers, they had been training her to be a suicide bomber and sold her to a trusted contact in Berlin. The buyer used her as a scapegoat in a truck bomb explosion. For propaganda purposes. Norfolk Dynamics typically execute their subjects after they had outlived their usefulness, but in the British teen’s case, she was allowed to exist for kindling propaganda. She posts videos addressing the British public and is paid to show up in court and give false interviews.”

“That is so insane,” I said finally.

“Norfolk Dynamics have a very diverse pool of subjects.” Lieutenant General Claiborne sighed. “They have kidnapped a soldier who served in the Belgian army last year. A Captain Cédric Geurde. He went missing from his army base in Antwerp. His roommate, Sergeant Freilich was found dead the next morning, most probably killed while resisting the kidnappers.”

“Norfolk Dynamics would take such great risks?” I exclaimed. “Going into Europe and kidnapping soldiers of NATO nations!”

“To them, it is a profitable business.” Claiborne remarked. “They create a super soldier, a killing machine which is programmed to obey any command, even the most lethal ones.”

I frowned. “How many other European soldiers were rescued from their laboratories?”

“Less than a dozen.” Claiborne said tightly. “There may have more people in their training camps, but we got confirmation of the Belgian and Dutch servicemen and women who have been kidnapped.”

“What do we know about the families of these men and women who had disappeared?”

“Unfortunately, the missing persons list account for less than half of their subject. Norfolk Dynamics typically stage the deaths of its victims before kidnapping them. In combat zones, they have the ideal settings. IED. Car bomb. Helicopter crash. The abduction in Antwerp was an exception but we think that the company needed a Belgian national to carry out a specific task.”

Henry nodded gravely. “Right now, we are diverting all our resources to rescue a Russian naval commander, who went missing from the Russian Udaloy-class destroyer Admiral Vinogradov. Officially, Kremlin believes he drowned, but we intercepted some chatter on Norfolk Dynamics frequencies that suggested that they have abducted him and is brainwashing him as we speak.”

I gasped at this news so audibly that even the general nodded. “Easy, John. I knew this would interest and disturb you so that is why I called you in here today. We hope you can make headway in to the rescue operation with more success than us.”

I took a deep breath, trying to think clearly, then I spoke to Henry. “If I want to rescue the Russian naval commander, I need to know exactly how Norfolk Dynamics control their subjects. What sort of drugs do they use?”

“Good question,” Henry said. “Why don’t you study this patient’s blood sample report.”

“What was this man injected with?”

“He tested positive for amphetamines, stimulants, steroids, and anesthetics. Even when taken separately, the effect of each of those drugs can be fatal, but since he was pumped with a combination of these drugs, his nervous system is unhinged.”

“His vitals are normal?”

“I wish.” Henry looked stoic. “His levels are off the charts. His epinephrine levels are five times the normal limit. His entire sympathetic system is surging.”

“Were you able to identify which drug caused him to act this way?”

“You mean why a normal guy decided to shoot up a police station?” Henry repeated. “No, one of the drugs used on him was PZ1, a new splice variant of the PKC-zeta-interacting protein family, that had been clinically proven to erase short and long-term memory.”

“I’ve heard of zeta protein- It was believed to erase a subject’s memory, but it was never tested on humans before.”

“Until now. Toxicology reports confirm that the victim’s body was overloaded with PZ1. It is a rare drug, and if used in high doses could cause permanent brain damage.”

I inquired. “How does it work?”

“The PZ1 is a cytoplasmic and membrane-associated protein that is inserted into the neuronal tissue. It literally binds with brain cells and wipe off the memory chips.”

“He looks restless,” I observed.

“That is because his heart rate, blood pressure is out of control. For the two years he was held in that Norfolk testing center, this man was pumped with high levels of steroids. He was regularly given ephedrine to sharpen mental acuity, and was also injected with a cocktail of mood-altering drugs to reduce stress and fear. We put him to sleep but his brain is still in a flight mode.”

“So, if I am able to find and rescue the naval officer of the Russian Udaloy-class destroyer Admiral Vinogradov, I should give him a sedative?”

Henry shook his head, smiling mildly. “Let the health experts worry about that.” He pressed a small briefcase in my hands. “Everything you need to calm the victim is in here. Good luck!”

Vyacheslav Puzanov called on my personal line. “I just received an alert from General Shuvalov, our defense minister,” he said without preamble. “An international crisis might be taking place now.”

“Slava, calm down. What sort of crisis are you talking about?” I asked the Russian intelligence officer. I knew he was an independent consultant for the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and he had access to information the CIA had no clue about.

This was the fifth call I had received since morning and all were related to an impending nuclear attack somewhere in Europe. I wondered if Vyacheslav had contacted me regarding the same emergency.

“This is an urgent matter and must be discussed in person.”

I agreed to the time and place. An hour later, we stood under a pedestrian overpass and exchanged perfunctory greetings.

“The defense ministry alerted us of a break in,” my friend spoke slowly, but I could sense the urgency in his voice. “A nuclear weapons storage site in the Kaliningrad region has been compromised.”

“What do you mean compromised?”

“Broken into- several warheads are missing.”

“Tell me, where exactly is the facility located?”

“About forty kilometers from the Polish border. One of the underground bunkers near Kulikovo was breached and two nuclear tipped missiles were stolen.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know the defense ministry kept FSB in the loop?”

“They don’t. I’m in SVR now.”

“Slava, you have been promoted then? I am happy for you, my friend.

“I accepted this job at the SVR because being an independent consultant for the Federal Security Service was rather uneventful.”

“Well, now your hands are going to be full, I am sure.”

“About that- I am starting to feel I have bitten off more than I could eat-”

“More than you could chew,” I corrected the Russian intelligence officer.

Vyacheslav let out a burst of laughter, before sobering up. “I am here for a favor. Can you help me find something?”

“Slava, for you, anything.” I said with sincerity.

“We were able to obtain digital satellite images from over the nuclear facility. SVR has reasons to believe the nuclear warheads were smuggled out of Russia and is currently being transported into France. We are afraid the perpetrators are targeting Paris as their testing ground.”

“I don’t understand. Russian nuclear missile storage facilities are supposed to be the most secure locations in the world. How could someone break in?”

The senior SVR officer flattened his lips. “The outer security perimeter was breached when the site was being upgraded last month.”

“I see. And you are sure the warhead was being manually transported to France?”

Vyacheslav Puzanov nodded. “We received a tip that the weapon arrived at the Marseille Fos Port sixteen days ago.”

“Marseille is France’s largest port,” I warned my friend. “How do you plan to find out where the bomb was transported after arriving at this port?”

“That is why I came to you. Your resources would be useful.”

Known for decades as the KGB, Russia's External Intelligence Service was one of the world's oldest and most extensive espionage agencies. Its operatives excelled in intelligence gathering. If Vyacheslav believed there was an imminent threat facing France, he was probably right.

"How can I help?"

"One of the men we tracked to Marseille was a former associate of your former employer."

"My employer?" I was genuinely puzzled.

"Yes, the short man who always wore tailored suits. Reinhard, I believe. The director of NSA's black op division which you were temporarily a member of."

"Richard." I breathed. The unfolding crisis was beginning to make sense. Ever since Cynthia began to date Gérald Sarközy, the Frenchman's life came under attack repeatedly. There was a bomb explosion in Gérald's vehicle that nearly caused his death and armed assailants tried to gun him down numerous times. Not long after that, a Frenchman was decapitated outside the Bois-d'Aulne school in the north of Paris. It was near the residence of Cynthia's boyfriend. Gérald Sarközy owned a villa in that area. The alleged perpetrator, unsurprisingly, was a Russian-born 18-year-old boy. I had expected Richard to target French interests in order to exact revenge against his stepdaughter's latest boyfriend, but even I was dismayed to see him frame Russians for the attacks.

It seemed that Cynthia's stepfather was starting his crusade against Frenchman and his country.

I requested Vyacheslav to use his Europol contacts and activate the national warning system and if necessary, initiate a nuclear missile alert over major French cities.

Richard wanted to legitimize anti-Russian racism in the public discourse and he knew it would work only if he executed a large-scale attack framing Russian nationals or used a Russian missile to destroy French cities. The only way to prevent Cynthia's stepfather from succeeding was by preventing the nuclear attacks from taking place.

My friend Vyacheslav was still speaking. He was directing a question at me. I broke from my reverie and looked blankly at him.

"I wanted to ask your opinion." The senior SVR officer stated.

"My opinion? About what?"

"How do you think that man- Reinhard -came to learn all the details about our nuclear facilities? Only the most senior FSB officials knew those bunkers existed. The locations were classified."

"Slava, maybe, it's time I confess something."

"Confess?" Vyacheslav repeated.

"Yes, do you remember Ekaterina Glazova?"

"The infamous former KGB operative? How can I forget? She was all over the news. But wasn't she dead? Shot trying to escape, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, but the part of her story that never made to the news is that after she escaped from the federal penitentiary, Ekaterina was kidnapped by her former husband Richard."

"Richard as in Reinhard?"

"Yes, after defecting to the United States, Reinhard assumed the alias Richard. Anyway, for eight months, he kept Ekaterina in an underground bunker in Montana. She was being tortured, starved and electrocuted constantly. Until my friend Dustin managed to track Richard's whereabouts and then I followed his trail which ultimately led me to her lair."

"She was alive?" The Russian intelligence officer took in a sharp breath. "When you found her?"

I nodded. "When I rescued Ekaterina, her health was failing. Due to the effect of severe torture, she had suffered multiple heart attacks while in Richard's custody. After recovering somewhat, Ekaterina told me Richard had held her captive in order to learn about all the nuclear power generating stations in Russia. He also wanted the coordinates of the missile storage facilities. I don't know how much information he was able to glean from Ekaterina, but I am now guessing it was enough."

"Enough to breach secure perimeters of two of our nuclear missile storage bunkers and steal a number of warheads." Vyacheslav was scowling. "What else were you able to learn from Ekaterina before she died?"

"Not much," I answered truthfully. "I realized the danger she was in- wanted by both the US government and her ex-husband, so I hid her at a safehouse in Washington, near the Canadian border. My plan was to fly her to Alaska and then send her back to Russia but things didn't work out."

"Were you compromised?" The SVR officer sounded skeptical.

"Why do you say that, Slava? I wanted to protect and help that woman."

My Russian friend squinted his eyes. "I find it hard to believe an accomplished operative like yourself would lead a raiding party to Ekaterina's safehouse. You know very well how to move about without being followed."

I thought I sensed an accusatory tone in Vyacheslav's voice. "I didn't bring any SWAT team with me to Ekaterina's safehouse. It's the truth, Slava."

"Then who shot her?" Vyacheslav Puzanov flung an accusing look in my direction. "You were the only one who knew where our operative was hiding!"

"That's not exactly correct," I said quietly. "Her daughter Cynthia also knew where she was staying."

"How did the daughter find out?"

"I told her, Slava, and I am not going to apologize for it. Ekaterina begged me to bring her daughter to her- just once. Before she fled to Russian, she wanted to see the child she left behind so many years ago. And I thought it was the right thing to do. I hoped Cynthia would realize her mother was innocent after she heard her side of the story."

"So, you arranged the mother-daughter reunion? But that doesn't explain how Ekaterina was shot."

"It was complicated. You see, Cynthia was manipulated by Richard into believing her mother was a Russian spy who betrayed her father and killed American agents. She wanted her mother to face justice in an American court. When I brought Cynthia to see her mother, I thought they were getting along well. They laughed, hugged and even cried. I didn't think Cynthia would ever alert the authorities."

"But she did?"

I sighed. "She was with her mother all day, and then at night, we went to bed and she casually mentioned she would miss her mother. I didn't know what Cynthia was talking about. She then told me she had already notified the U.S. Marshals about Ekaterina Glazova's whereabouts. They were scheduled to bring in the cavalry before dawn and take the KGB spy into custody."

"Why didn't you take Ekaterina away immediately?"

"Slava, I wanted to. I tried but you can't understand how much I panicked. Cynthia had informed me that the U.S. Marshals' Redstar Fugitive Task Force in Spokane, Washington, was leading the manhunt because Ekaterina was one of the country's most wanted fugitives. I knew if Cynthia suspected that I would help her mother escape, she would try to stop me so waited until Cynthia fell asleep, then I ran to a phone booth and called the nearest military base and offered one of the chopper pilots hundred grands to fly his bird to my location. I had to think fast. I wanted to fly Ekaterina out of there before U.S. Marshals and their deputies arrived."

"Did the helicopter man come?"

"Yes, in fifty minutes. The pilot tried to land his chopper right outside the safehouse, but the terrain wasn't suitable for aircraft landings so he dropped the *helivac* lanyard and told me to make his passenger climb the rope. I went to the house and brought Ekaterina to the clearing. Even at her age, the former KGB operative was remarkably strong. She was climbing up the rope without any harness or assistance and almost reached the helicopter when her daughter showed up."

"I thought you said her daughter was asleep?"

"Cynthia was asleep," I reiterated, "but the noise of the helicopter must have awakened her. She ran directly under the helicopter and called her mom, shouting at her to come back. But Ekaterina didn't listen to her daughter. I remember her looking down at Cynthia, saying she loved her a lot. Then she turned back and was about to climb into the helicopter cabin. That's when it happened."

"What happened?"

"Cynthia pulled out her service weapon and aimed at her mother. Again, she shouted and warned Ekaterina if she didn't climb down, she would shoot. Ekaterina smiled and said she didn't believe her own daughter could shoot her, and that's when Cynthia pulled the trigger. I'm not sure where the bullet hit her, but I saw Ekaterina staggering. She almost fell but grabbed the helicopter's landing skid with one hand. Incredibly, the woman was holding on to the airborne chopper. Meanwhile, the pilot began to fly away, so Cynthia used her both hands to fire the second round at her mother. This bullet would probably have hit her chest but by this time, I reached Cynthia and used my body to knock her to the ground. But I was too late. The bullet grazed the KGB operative's left wrist. Ekaterina lost balance and fell with a horrible thud, right in front of us. The height she fell from was- was too much. The fall was fatal."

"You were there, and you could not stop Cynthia from shooting her mother?" The SVR agent observed mournfully.

"Slava, I never imagined, never even thought it was possible for Cynthia to do something like that. How could I know she would actually pull the trigger?"

My friend looked devastated. He didn't speak for several minutes. Then he nodded curtly. "I don't blame you at all. You couldn't have known the infamous KGB operative would be killed by her own daughter. But tell me this: was there any other piece of information you learned from Ekaterina prior to her unfortunate demise?"

"She was worried that Richard was probably after the Russian nuclear arsenal and was working tirelessly to get his hands on those."

“Ekaterina Glazova may have known the rough location of the missile storage bunkers, but the woman didn’t have clearance for entering the nuclear facilities. Even under duress, she couldn’t have told him about the security protocols. That means Richard procured that information from other sources.”

“SVR should use their resources to comb the background of all the personnel who were involved in the excavation.” I advised my friend. “The port in Marseilles handles over eighty million tons of goods per year. It won’t be possible to scan the contents of every single container. Your best bet is finding out who smuggled the warhead out of Russia.”

“A digital satellite image we recovered showed one of three underground bunkers near Kulikovo that were being excavated in August, and getting covered up again in October. Before the bunkers were returned to operational status, several hundred personnel volunteered to transport the cargo in. Any one of them could have been on Reinhard’s payroll.”

“True,” I said absently. “Let me work on another angle. I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Which angle will you focus on?”

“I’ve seen how Richard works, Slava, and I think I know where he is planning to detonate the nuke. It will be around Gérald Sarközy’s hometown.”

“Who is this Gérald?” The senior SVR officer looked confused.

“Gérald Sarközy is Cynthia’s latest boyfriend. But don’t worry about him. He is a senior member of the French parliament and has family members in almost all branches of the French government. I’ll get in touch with him via Cynthia and apprise them of the danger they are facing.”

“And what if the nuclear missile detonates?” Vyacheslav Puzanov ran a hand over his face. “Do you have any idea what it will look like? The French will think Russia attacked them and the entire EU will retaliate at once.”

I could feel the muscles in my face tingling. Blood was rushing to my cheeks as I realized what Richard’s end game was. “Slava, that’s it! That is exactly what Richard wants. He will detonate a Russian nuke and frame a Russian national for it like he did a few days ago- in the fake beheading incident where an eighteen-year-old Russian boy was framed.”

“We could recall all Russian nationals from France,” Vyacheslav said uncertainly. “But there is another matter. SVR intercepted a communiqué that was being forwarded to the MAD.”

“The German Military Counterintelligence Service?” I questioned. “What did the communiqué say?”

My Russian friend hesitated. “Well, the information is unconfirmed as of now, but agents working in the *Militärischer Abschirmdienst* reported that the cargo scanning of the freight shipping containers in the port of Bremerhaven gave an alert. There was a presence of radioactive particle, meaning a nuclear weapon may have passed the port into the country. The Russian Federation is worried that it may one of the warheads that were stolen from us.”

I shook my head in despair.

Vyacheslav spoke haltingly. “You once mentioned Richard is from Austria. Do you think he will actually detonate a nuclear bomb over Germany just to spark another global conflict?”

“Richard is half Austrian and half Hungarian, and I am not sure of what he is capable of doing. He really seems unstable. I don’t think someone in his right mind would ever agree to carry out such destructive actions. Maybe it was something that happened to him as child, or some trauma he faced- it is not normal. He knows it is preposterous. Richard knows if he detonates three nuclear warheads over France just because his stepdaughter’s boyfriend lives there, it will not only incinerate the country but also destroy Germany, Czech Republic and his own home state of Austria. I don’t think he is sane, Slava, I think he may have totally lost his mind. It is not normal to be so obsessed with his one’s daughter, or to go so far in exacting revenge. Now, he wants to punish for dating his daughter years ago- and he is using Russian made bombs so he could tell the world the Russian Federation perpetrated this act of violence.”

“Should we make an announcement and tell all Russian citizens to remain on alert, because any one of them could be framed?”

“It won’t matter because Richard will still detonate the stolen Russian nuke and frame a Middle Eastern national for it. He might even pay a Turkish government official or a Saudi Arabian prince to claim responsibility for the attack. This is what he always wanted. To frame Russia and start a world war.” I cautioned. “Remember, Slava, the man you are dealing with is not normal. Richard is partially insane. He may look normal, dress neatly, but his head is not wired properly. What can I say? He was always like that. Maybe when his wife left him, it triggered ugly emotions, and then he depended emotionally on his daughter Cynthia, and when she left him, he really lost all senses and now thinks bombarding ten countries for breakfast is normal.”

“Moscow is very anxious about this situation.” My friend paced nervously. “What should I do?”

“Tell them the truth. I mean, the French government. Let them know one of your nuclear warheads are missing.”

“We cannot do that,” Vyacheslav declared. “It would totally undermine Russia’s credibility.”

“You worry about credibility, Slava? If Richard succeeds in framing Russian nationals for the French attacks, then Russia would be annihilated!”

“I understand what is at stake, but if the EU nations or the US of A finds out about our security breach, they will pressure us into reducing the number of nuclear warheads we possess. America and her NATO allies will withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty at once and will force us to destroy most of our intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and nuclear bombers.” The Russian intelligence officer sighed. “This is critical time for us. The INF treaty is the only active arms-control deal between us and the Americans. And it is due to expire next year. Americans won’t renew the deal if they find a flaw in our system.”

“Then let’s hope it doesn’t come down to that,” I said, speaking in a low tone.

The senior SVR officer was still agitated.

“Don’t worry, Slava, I’ll have my contacts in France locate the warhead. We’ll stop them. Trust me.”

When Vyacheslav calmed down, I took leave and drove directly to Joe’s computer lab. The British hacker was engrossed in perfecting a video game.

I waved my hand over his face. “Joe, there is something you need to do.”

“Blimey!” The hacker leaped to his feet. “John, you look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“Well, I need your help.” I was speaking slowly, trying not to break down in fear.

“Sure, mate.” Joe rolled his chair over to the multi-screen computer and activated the monitor. “What are we looking for?”

“Several people- one of whom is an associate of Richard’s -stole a handful of nuclear warheads from a nuclear weapons storage site in the Kaliningrad region of Russia. SVR and FSB are looking for the perpetrators as we speak and they’ve narrowed their search to France. It was smuggled into the Marseille Fos Port.”

“I’ll start a search into their cargo data. It looks like ten thousand vessels used the port of Marseille-Fos this year. It would help if I knew the date of arrival.”

“Six weeks ago.”

“It was around the time the uproar began in France about the magazine, innit?”

“What magazine?” I racked my brains, trying to recall which incident had caused an uproar.

“It was all over the news,” Joe said. “Controversy started when a French satirical weekly magazine published cartoons of some popular figures.”

“I didn’t know you read magazines, Joe.”

“I don’t, actually,” the hacker admitted, “but you are the one who asked me to keep an eye on anything related to Richard, and hence, I stumbled across the magazine’s editorial staff.”

“What does the French magazine have to do with Richard? He is a subscriber?”

Joe shook his head. “Oh, no. Much more than that. According to the wire transfers, Richard practically owns the magazine and everyone who works for it.”

“How?” I inquired.

“Remember how you had asked me to keep an eye on Richard’s offshore bank accounts? The ones he used to fund Blacksand security consultants in Syria and China?” Joe spoke hurriedly. “Well, my app sounded an alert few weeks back. I finally came across several large payments that went directly from Richard’s account to the Banque De France; one million euro went to the account of a man named Manuel Biared. I thought his name sounded familiar so I did a quick search and came across a satirical magazine called *Charles Hamo*. The magazine’s owner was Manuel Biared.”

“Why was Richard sending a magazine guy one million euro?”

The British hacker nodded excitedly. “Bizarre, right? Well, not after you read this message. I unearthed fifteen encrypted emails that went between Richard and Manuel Biared. You are welcome to read them.”

“Spare me the details, Joe. Just tell me what instructions Richard was relaying to the magazine owner.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure what to make of it. The emails varied, but almost all of them contained specific instructions of what to print in their weekly publication. The first one talks about an Arab prophet known as Mohomet. Richard told the editor he wanted the magazine to print caricatures of the prophet and make it as insulting as possible. He also warned there might be a backlash and protest but they needn’t be afraid because he will protect them with private security personnel as well as teams of lawyers and publicists. Richard promised to wire another million the week after and continue sending money if the editor carries on printing offensive cartoons.”

I scanned the emails that were mailed to French magazine editor. “Why does this email mention an arson?”

Joe glanced at the tab I had opened. "Yes, if you read the email in its entirety, you will see that Richard told the editors he arranged for some controlled backlash which including burning down the magazine's main office on certain date. He asked Biared to ensure none of his staff remain in office that evening in order to allow the arson to take place."

"Who was supposed to be burning the Charles Hamo building?"

"According to Richard's email, he says he will frame either a Russian immigrant or an Arab, depending on availability."

"Joe, a month back, you read a small news excerpt to me. It was about a beheading. Could you refresh my memory?"

The British hacker cleared his throat and reread the news clipping. "Paris police shot an eighteen-year-old Russian boy, who was suspected of beheading his teacher over a row about offensive caricatures."

"Right. And French intelligence claimed the Russian terrorist was funded by Kremlin, correct?"

Joe nodded. "In their press briefing, DGSE said the suspect may have been a Russian agent. You think Richard was behind this?"

"I don't just think so, I know Richard is behind the beheading. Aside from arson, what else did Richard warn the magazine owner about?"

"From the emails I have thus far decrypted, there are no new information. But I am decoding seven more messages he sent to Manuel Biared right now. I'll know more in an hour."

"Good work, Joe. Keep digging."

I left Joe's work station and continued to investigate the anomalies that were taking place in the NSA black ops unit. Richard was not working alone, and he had an Italian man working for him. Richard and the Italian man were very close to each other and loved each other very much, but I wanted to find out everything else they had planned together.

Ramstein Air Base, Germany

"I haven't seen you before. Who are you?"

"I am Randall. Like hundreds of men here, I was also recruited into the black ops unit and was duped into believing that the United States government had officially employed us for clandestine work, but we were so wrong."

The man named Randall then told me about the Italian-American admiral who recruited European mercenaries to carry out acts of terror in various parts of the world.

He told me about several investigations the U.S. Military intelligence was conducting and said he heard about me from my friend Dustin.

I asked him. "So, what were you doing before you became a secret agent in this illegal unit with the Italian mafia man?"

"I was the Officer in Charge at the 24th Special Tactics Squadron, in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I was recruited the same year I was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal. The same Italian man approached me and said he was an Admiral and asked me if I was interested in serving my country. I agreed, obviously. And he immediately told me to accompany him to Afghanistan."

"What happened after that?" I asked Randall.

"I got to know my commander. It was a man known as Bastico. Admiral Baldassarre Bastico is originally from Italy, but he has been serving in the military of the United States for many years. He used soldiers from his own army as well as criminals from Italy and Germany to create several terrorist organizations, like the ISIS and more recently, the Taliban."

"How did he manage to create this Taliban group?" I asked.

"Bastico has been visiting Afghanistan since 1980." Randall answered.

"1980?"

"Yes, that was soon after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and the CIA deputy director, who was a close friend of Richard, decided to send the Italian naval officer to Afghanistan in order to build up a resistance group." Randall said. "Baldassarre Bastico immediately went to Afghanistan and created this group called the Taliban. Their job was to pretend to be Moslems, and kill as many as Russian soldiers as they could."

"What happened after the Russians left Afghanistan?"

Randall answered calmly. "The CIA and other NSA officers continued to send this Italian commander to Afghanistan, and they told Taliban members to pretend to be real Moslems, and beat women in the streets of Kabul, and execute children and the elderly."

"Why did they give these bizarre instructions?" I asked again.

"The main objective of this Taliban group was to claim responsibility for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States."

"Why did they have to take the blame for the attack?"

Randall paused. "The Italian officer told the Taliban leaders to tell American and Western media that they are hiding Usama ben Laden. Once American media publicized this report, they were able to use that as a pretext to invade Afghanistan. That was the real objective of Richard and his Italian employee."

"Who are these people who are claiming to be leaders of Afghanistan?" I asked him.

"The current Taliban leadership is composed of entirely Eastern European mercenaries and local Afghan ex-Moslems, and they have a secret headquarters in Kandahar where they make all the fake execution videos and announce compulsory slavery for all women in Afghanistan. They are not Moslems but they tell media and newspapers that they are an Islamic government. The whole thing was this Italian-American man's orders. He told those ex-Moslem Afghans to make a terrorist group and call themselves the Islamic Emirate, but none of the current Taliban members are Moslems."

"How can you be so certain that the entire Taliban show that is going on in Afghanistan is a farce?"

"Believe me, I did my research. And I spoke to dozens of marines and special forces who had been duped into working for the organization called the Lethal Unit."

"The Lethal Unit?" I repeated.

"Yes, well, that is what they call themselves. Lethal Unit, also known as the Taliban, are the main force responsible for kidnapping women and children in Kabul. They are also publicly executing surrendering prisoners, and government bureaucrats throughout Afghanistan."

"Since when did this Taliban group become compromised?"

"Since 1988," Randall replied.

"You can't be serious!"

"But I am," Randall insisted. "I met this 89-year-old man in Herat, Afghanistan. He told me how he was paid by Richard back in 1989, and he was supplied with advanced weapons and was able to sell those ammunitions and earned a lot of money, and did many successful opium and drug dealings."

"So, who did the old man fight with, using his weapons?"

"The old Afghan man said, Richard told them that he would supply them with lots of powerful bombers and tankers, in exchange, they must kill Soviet troops as much as they could."

"I find this so difficult to understand," I said slowly.

"Did you actually believe that a bunch of villagers could take over Afghanistan in one week? Something both the Soviet and the American government could not accomplish in many years."

"I don't know what to believe."

"Let me tell you what to believe. What do you think happened to Afghanistan in 1987? Afghan goat herders were killing the powerful Soviet army. But, what no one knows is that Afghans were not killing them; instead, Richard and his Italian friend were using their powerful black ops groups and was killing Soviet soldiers who fought there. They supplied Afghan villagers with weapons, but the Soviets thought the villagers were attacking them. They, unfortunately, hit back and killed many innocent Afghan civilians. But some Soviet commanders were actually sure they were fighting against a sophisticated group of mercenaries.

They were killing Russian soldiers the entire time and created a fake terrorist group like the Taliban and ordered them to take the blame for all the shelling. But anyone who had some brains knew that a bunch of villagers and cavemen could never have managed to throw the Soviets out."

"How did this Navy officer manage to organize such a large group? I mean, everyone in the world believes that the Taliban fighters are real Moslem Afghans. They don't know that those men brandishing weapons are actually non-Moslems."

Randall replied quickly. "The Italian man later began to operate from a secret CIA base outside of Kabul, and from there, he hired thousands of local drug traders, war lords, and Afghan civilians who were apostates and agreed to fight against the Moslem population."

"What did Bastico order them to do?" I wanted to know.

"Admiral Bastico ordered those non-Moslem Afghan actors and volunteers to wear traditional Taliban clothes and then pose as members of the Taliban's religious police, and they video a lot of random scenes where these fake Taliban members beat women and kill children."

Randall continued to speak. "This international group of mercenaries who made the ISIS was also responsible for creating the fake Taliban group. The Italian-American man, whose real name is Baldassarre Bastico, supplied these ex-Muslim fighters with lots of weapons. They also paid hundreds of Indian and Burmese Hindu nationals and also many Afghan citizens who officially renounced Islam, and had been helping American and coalition troops capture suspected Mujahideen fighters and torture other Muslim Afghans. The Italian man made sure that all the heads of Taliban are his personal assistants. For example, the Taliban spokesman and other men

who pose as Muslim fighters are all non-Muslim mercenaries from Eastern Europe. They have instructions to use millions of untraceable money and overthrow the legitimate government of Afghanistan, and execute women and civilians in the streets, and announce on video that they are killing everyone because Alla and Mahomet told them to kill and torture innocent people."

I asked. "Why are they doing these terrible acts?"

"It is mainly because the Italian-American man, Baldassarre Bastico, wants to make Muslims look like savages. He hates Islam very much."

I asked again. "But why does he hate Muslims in particular?"

Randall replied. "It is partially because Bastico was a special force commander during the Iraq and Afghanistan war, and he and his teammates were responsible for executing civilians in drone strikes, and also mutilating bodies of dead women and children. He was even reprimanded by the American military courts, and demoted once. However, this made him more angry, and ever since he was accused of crimes against humanity, his obsession is to make Muslims look even worse."

"Is that why he created this new Taliban group in Afghanistan?"

"Yes," Randall said. "The same way his German colleague made the ISIS terror network in the Middle East. The whole idea was to convince everyone who watches the news and television that Arabs are violent. This Italian man ordered his agents inside Taliban and ISIS to act like Muslims, and put on beard, and then kill and rape civilians, and murder their own people."

"So, right now, those people who are pretending to be Taliban are not Muslims?"

"No, they were never Muslims from the beginning. Those men are all European mercenary criminals. Some are Afghan nationals who call themselves ex-Muslims and they are all trying to assume power in Afghanistan and then the Italian man ordered them to invade Pakistan and Iran, and steal all nuclear weapons from there."

"Why is this Italian-American criminal so interested in stealing nuclear weapons from Pakistan?"

"Because he wants to use those bombs to nuke America, and tell the world media and newspapers that Muslims attacked the United States."

"But why does he want to drop nuclear weapons over the United States?"

Randall spoke slowly. "This Italian-American man, Baldassarre Bastico, wants to become the president of the United States, so he thought if he detonated a nuclear weapon over Washington D.C. and kill all of the Congress and Senate House members, then he would be able to seize power by declaring a state of national emergency."

"I understand he does not care about the United States government, but if he wants to detonate a nuclear bomb, why does he have to frame Afghans and Pakistan for it?"

"He wants Americans to think that Pakistani military supplied Afghan Taliban with nuclear weapon and they gave this attack over the United States. Because everyone knows that after an attack of this massive scale, America will be determined to take revenge on the perpetrator. This Italian man does not want the United States military to take revenge on Italy, so he is very eager to make sure the blame falls on the countries he hates, like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran or Pakistan."

"I suspected that whoever was controlling the Taliban were criminals."

"Why did you think that?"

"Because why would they overthrow the legitimate Afghan government and murder their own countrymen."

Yes, it is strange. Very few people know the truth about these Taliban fighters. None of them are Muslims, and all the commanders are either ex-Muslim Afghans, and the rest are European criminals who work directly for the Italian military commander."

"Right."

"They are putting up a very convincing act." I commented.

"Yes, they are indeed. These men who created the fake Taliban organization also made the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. They always make a group and order the fake members to pose and pretend to be Muslims, and then to kill and rape a lot of Muslim people, so that the whole world thinks Muslims are violent, and blame all the Italian man's crimes on Islam." Randall explained.

"I want to know what is really happening, Randall." I pleaded. "I want to find out the truth."

"Very well. I will set you a meeting with one of Bastico's main agents who is now in Afghanistan."

Eleven hours later, Randall put me on a flight to a remote city in Central Asia. I was scheduled to meet a man who was working for the Italian-American commander's mercenary group.

"Your face looks very familiar." I told the man who came to meet me.

The tanned skin man smiled broadly. "I am the spokesperson of the honorable Taliban movement."

"If that is true, what are you doing in in this part of the country?" I asked him quickly. "This area is known to be a safe haven for opium farmers and other war lords."

"I work for the Lethal Unit."

"The what unit?" I asked.

The bearded man replied. "We call ourselves the Lethal Unit because it shows others how efficient we are at our jobs."

"And what is your job?" I asked again.

"We were asked to wear a black tunic and turban, and make a lot of public announcements calling for the death to all infidels and foreigners."

"Why?"

"Because our esteemed employer who supplied us with lots of weapons and Chinook helicopters promised to pay us in gold bars if we obeyed his instruction to the letter. He said we must create a group that looks authentically Moslem. So, we immediately decided to start a new group like ISIS, but our commander said it is wiser if we pretended to be Taliban fighters. We are supposed to do a lot of crimes in Afghanistan and act as though the Taliban members did it."

"What else did your leader order you?" I said.

The thick bearded man nodded. "Our only rule is to frame as many crimes as we can on Taliban and other Moslems."

"But why does all the media and journalists quote you as the spokesperson of Taliban?"

He laughed at my question. "Because that is how I introduce myself to the world media. They have no choice but to believe me."

I glanced curiously at him. "You look Afghan to me. Why would you want to pretend to be Taliban and talk about horrific acts like beheading and arson?"

"I pretend to be Taliban on camera, my friend, but I am not a Taliban man. Truly, I hate the Taliban the most in the world." The agent from Lethal Unit replied. "They only try to destroy our drug business, and attempt to stop all illegal weapons trading and assault of women, but to me, they are a very minor nuisance."

I asked again. "But when you talk about the execution of women and mutilating dead bodies, you claim the you are doing it for Alla? You look Moslem to me, so don't you feel a little guilty to smear your own faith?"

"My own faith?" The bearded man chuckled. "But I am not insulting my faith at all."

"Are you not Moslem?" I asked.

"By God, no! I have never followed this backward faith in years. Indeed, I have reverted from Islam over thirty years ago, and it was an honor for me to lead the hunt against Taliban Moslem members for the past two decades. In this past twenty years, I had the privilege of capturing and torturing real Afghan Moslems and many Taliban fighters to their death."

"Tortured the Taliban?" I repeated. "Why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted them to become apostates like me. I tortured them to force them to renounce Islam, but they always ended up dying from the severe beating, before I could harm them. You see, there is no use in following a fourteen-hundred-year-old religion, especially a faith that preaches nonsenses like treating men and women equal and forgiving the enemy. It is impractical and absurd."

I shook my head in confusion. "Listen. But let me go back to your appearance. You are wearing a turban, and tunic, and look like the average Taliban people know. You identify yourself as a Taliban spokesman, but what happens if real Afghan Moslems try to join your group and become professional fighters."

The Lethal Unit agent who was posing as a Taliban commander stood up. "We don't allow any Moslems to join this group. Why should we? It is a cover for our large-scale offensives so we cannot allow believing Afghan men to join our ranks, because they will create chaos by trying to stop us from bombing civilians in Kabul and won't let us kidnap women from the streets of Kandahar."

"Kidnap women?" I shouted. "Why on earth would you want to kidnap your own countrywomen?"

"It is all part of the orders we received from the Lethal Unit propaganda leaders. They want us to dress as Taliban and kidnap young women, and force them in to sex slavery to serve our so-called fighters. And then, we will make those girls give interview claiming the Taliban captured and assaulted her. This way, there will be no doubt in anybody's mind in the world that the Taliban Moslems are evil people. This is our only objective."

"Why is it your personal objective to make Taliban and Afghans look bad?"

"It is not only about the Taliban," the man replied. "We are generally against Moslems, because we are against the religion of Islam. Every single member of our Lethal Unit is either an ex-Moslem or someone who hates Afghans. We just want to make sure an Islamic group gets the blame for all the terrible crimes in the world."

"So, your Taliban group consists of only non-Moslems?" I clarified.

"Yes, and we never take any real Moslem in our group, because they try to stop us from killing civilians and torturing women or mutilating dead bodies."

"So, if by accident, a Moslem Afghan man tried to join your Taliban group, what would you tell him?" I suggested.

"Tell him? We would tell him nothing of our true nature and kill him instantly. We have to kill the Moslem Taliban before they manage to find out who we really are and expose us as apostates and ex-Moslems. Personally, I hate Moslems very much, so it is a pleasure for me to pretend to be Taliban and claim responsibility for these beheadings. Our orders are to contact Reuters and inform them that as Taliban fighters, we are killing these civilians in the name of Islam."

"I still thought you were Moslem?" I repeated.

"Then you are foolish, my friend. I spent twenty years capturing and torturing Afghan Moslems, and we never allow any Moslem to enter our ranks, primarily because they refuse to mutilate the dead and assault women, but these are necessary action we have to do constantly."

"Then who are the Moslem Taliban group?" I asked.

"There is no such a thing as Moslem Taliban. Our commander in Lethal Unit ordered us to kill any Afghan who tries to become a Taliban fighter, because we are the only group that should remain in the spotlight. We have been instructed to drag random people in the streets, dressed in traditional Afghan tunic and cap, and then we were told to execute innocent civilians and tell the spectators that Alla told us to do it."

I was so shocked and terrified to hear about this mercenary's story, that I immediately headed to the airport and left the country.

"Viktor, is the dog coming with us?" I asked, unable to conceal my disappointment.

The animal's wolf-like head and athletic body reminded me of the dogs who had pursued me countless times. I loved animals in general but after conducting missions worldwide for so many years, I developed a mild aversion for the canines. On more than one occasion, my escape attempts from deadly torture chambers were foiled when my enemy's sniffing dogs detected me and enabled my recapture. I had since developed an innate fear for those animals. Cats were my primary lovers at this point of life. But I could see that Viktor was devoted to this animal. His dog seemed calm, with eyes that almost had an intelligent glow in them.

My friend stroked his pet's head. "When I left Germany, Schatzi came here with me. She was the one thing that was real in my life."

"She immigrated?" I remarked. "It is nice to see your pet has acclimated well."

Viktor looked as though he hadn't heard me. "During my brief work at the Agency, I was unaware that my partner was a double agent, serving a rogue black op group. It was painful to learn the truth. But I survived knowing that Schatzi would be home, waiting for me."

I studied the dog. It looked like an average domestic animal but when I made eye contact, the dog growled softly. I tensed. There was almost a wolflike sharpness in its eyes.

Viktor and I checked Schatzi in the designated cargo area underneath the cabin and boarded the domestic flight to Philadelphia and took adjacent seats. Passengers were still boarding the plane and we hadn't located the potential target. Viktor offered to give the first round. He took my scanning eyeglasses and perched them on the bridge of his nose. If Joe's technical prowess could be trusted, then this device would effectively perform retinal scan on every single person Viktor faces. The positive identification of those individuals would be checked against all known criminals in this tristate area and ruled out or flagged accordingly. I hoped the glasses would be effective. Meanwhile, I began to make my way down the aisle in the hope of scanning the overhead luggage holder for suspicious items. Five minutes later, I returned to my seat. So far, the plane appeared secure.

Viktor Schluter spoke to me via the comm set. "What possible motives were we able to narrow down?"

"Honestly, Viktor, I wish I could be sure about even one of the motives. The guy is a United States senator. He has many enemies. For all we know, the perpetrator could be anyone."

Joe cleared his throat. "Maybe this would help. The senator we are planning to protect is currently the chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, and also serves on the Budget, Foreign Relations, and Commerce, Science and Transportation committees."

“That doesn’t sound threatening at all,” I commented dryly.

“It does when his vote may make the singular difference in the congressional approval of the funding for a domestic surveillance project.”

“How so?”

“According to phone conversations between the senator and House Speaker, the senator is opposed to the surveillance program and is planning to vote against it.”

“Who stands to benefit the most if the bill passes?”

“Let’s see,” Joe paused. “I got something. Halifax Armory won the contract to distribute electronic gadgets for the surveillance program. They’ll profit hundreds of millions if the congress approves the bill.”

“Where is Halifax Armory based?”

“It’s based in Pittsburgh,” Joe told us. “They are officially a security consulting firm but it looks like they do a lot more than mere consulting. I’m sending you the address of their headquarters now.”

The flight touched down at Philadelphia International Airport after midnight. Viktor and I disembarked separately, keeping an eye out for possible suspects.

Viktor’s spoke into the comms. “I have eyes on a hostile. Going to pursue.”

I didn’t bother to confirm and instead continued searching for the two men who were supposed to be on this flight. I connected to Joe’s line and asked him to send me a copy of the senator’s official schedule. The hacker sent me an address on Chestnut street. The senator’s travel itinerary listed him to be residing at the Kimpton Hotel for the next three days. For tomorrow, he only had one public engagement. At 12:00 p.m., the senator was scheduled to hold a press briefing regarding the nomination of Alfred Hanley to be Secretary of Commerce.

I booked a room on the same floor as the senator’s entourage and two hours before he was scheduled to read the press release, I inspected the area around the lobby. Nothing suspicious could be found.

During lunchtime, the senator left the hotel and walked to a seafood restaurant that was situated a block away from the hotel. His aide and personal security detail followed him. I trailed close behind.

Before the senator entered the building, I saw a jeep racing down the street. The windows of the vehicle were opaque. But the passenger side window was lowered and I could see the glint of a sniper rifle inside. I opened my mouth to shout a warning to the senator but I was over a hundred feet away. There was no way I could reach him in time.

Then I saw a shadowy figure hurtling towards the senator and shoving him out of harms way. It was Viktor. He had arrived on time to save the senator’s life. I asked Viktor to escort the senator to safety and keep him in a hotel room that was registered under one of our aliases while I volunteered to track down the shooter.

Joe looped me in through the traffic cameras and I managed corner the assailants to a parking garage near the Newark Airport. The were escaping on foot when I managed to capture them and hand them over to the PPD. The detectives at the PPD’s Homeland Security Bureau interrogated the men and discovered they belonged to *Nordic Outlaws*, a white vigilante group based in San Antonio. Since 2001, the FBI had designated the Nordic Outlaws as a domestic terrorist organization.

The men I captured admitted to have been hired by the managing director of Halifax Armory, the private security company that would profit the most if the senator was unable to kill the domestic surveillance bill with his vote.

As a precaution, the Philly police advised the senator to cancel all his public engagements until the he had voted on the bill and the senator agreed to remain in the safehouse Viktor had dropped him off earlier that day.

Although the senator had his own personal security guards protecting, I remained with him for the duration of the stay. I hoped to guard the senator during the night while Viktor could shadow him during the day. But the next morning, my friend Viktor didn’t show up at the safehouse. I tried to contact him using our secure mode of communication, but the line was dead. I contacted Joe, but he too was being unable to locate Viktor.

When I arrived at the safehouse, I found Viktor bound to a wooden chair. He was barely conscious. I saw dozens of bloodied BBQ skewers lying in the room. The kidnappers had apparently tortured him using the skewers.

When Viktor saw me, his lips moved.

“The senator,” he whispered audibly. “They want his location.”

“Hush, don’t talk.”

“The senator. Not safe.”

“I know, I know,” I assured my friend. “We caught the bad guys. The senator is fine, Viktor. You just hold on. I’m taking you to a hospital.”

My eyes flooded with tears when I saw his back. It was terribly bruised. He was bleeding profusely and there were dozens of small holes drilled in the back of his neck and spine. The former German special force operative had been most viciously tortured but he still didn't give up the senator's location.

Viktor's resilience impressed me. I was astounded to see that he could withstand such great pains. No matter how much he was tortured, he refused to cry or complain. I marveled at his courage because I never knew what it meant to be so brave.

I had my share of suffering and had to undergo various levels of torment. When I was framed for the bombing at a political convention, Richard managed to convince the US authorities that I was a dangerous terrorist who had worked for Project ISIS. My beloved Cynthia aided the NSA agents in capturing me and handed me over to CIA's black ops group who were in charge of interrogating enemy combatants. It was in their black site that my hell began. My captors reveled in administering pain and for weeks, I was put through the severest level of government sanctioned enhanced interrogation.

I wish I could tell you I was brave, that I didn't dissolve in tears every time the torturers jingled the keys of my cell, but I was not gallant. My bladder gave away when they first administered electric shocks to my temple and the center of my head. Such excruciating pain- I don't know how I survived the indescribable agony. I was not strong enough to tolerate the agony and torment. My heart gave away and my spirit broke down.

For many months, I rested at night in peace, knowing a dangerous traitor and terrorist like Richard was locked under the custody of the United States Government. The man who had tried to bomb densely populated cities like New York, Paris, Berlin and London and tried to use his private military contractors kill thousands of innocent people was finally where he belonged. He could not hurt me from his cell, but I had feared that if Richard succeeded in escaping from prison, he would be sure to come after me anew. This time, he would try to kill me.

I was heading to my residence one evening when I had the nagging feeling on my back; as though someone was following me. I couldn't locate anyone suspicious, but the feeling was persistent. I was certain I was being watched.

I took three additional detours and finally prepared to use the subway to go home. As I was exiting the subway, two men jumped me and attempted to pierce my face with a bayonet. I used my bare hands to grab the blade and move it away from my face, then I used my leg to trip my assailants. I managed to capture one of them. The other ran away.

After several hours of questioning, the man admitted being hired by a man named Kirill. I knew who he was talking about: it was the leader of New York's Odessa mafia clan. I couldn't fathom why the mafia would go out of their way to kill me, so I headed straight to the ballet theater in Rego Park where I knew senior Bratva men were present. I knew Russian organized crime operated just about everywhere so I barged my way to the head of the table and located Kirill right away; he was sitting with his men. I approached him and demanded an explanation.

The Odessa mafia clan leader said he was paid sixteen million dollars to kill me, but as we spoke, the theater's lights dimmed. The mafia men ignored the occurrence and continued watching the dance but I knew it was typical of a professional strike team to disable the power line. I knew the Odessa clan was under attack so I shoved the leader under the seat just as a hail of bullets thudded harmlessly in the soft armchair where he was seated. After exchanging gunfire for several minutes, the attackers withdrew. Kirill later told me a rival gang member had tried to kill him, but he assured me of his gratitude. He said I saved his life at great personal risk and delivered him safely to his men.

But then, in a low voice, he confessed that he was hired to assassinate me, but agreed to let me live to repay me for saving him. I requested him to tell me the name of the man who hired him, but Kirill said he never came to him personally and only paid in uncut diamonds. I had no bank account to trace, I thought crestfallen.

A week later, I was making my way into a subway when dozens of passersby including several homeless men tried to kill me. One seemingly civilian looking man tried to run a knife into my stomach. And in broad daylight! I recognized the weapon one of the killers were carrying. It was Russian made, typically used by the mafia hitmen. I was beyond shocked. Kirill had given me his word that he would not send killers after me. I ran inside the train compartment and changed my destination at every stop. I barely made out alive that day.

The next morning, I stalked the house of the man who had sent his men to hurt me. I scanned the property but could not find any sign of the son. The leader was pacing in his dining room all alone. Aside from his bodyguards, I could see no one else in the residence. I crept neared, overpowering the guards, but when I stood by the window, I could hear the gang leader barking instruction on his private phone. He was instructing his men to continue searching for his son and execute the kidnappers.

I couldn't believe my ears! Could it be possible that the son of the Odessa mafia clan leader had been kidnapped? I waited for a few more minutes and heard him making another call. This time, he instructed one of his men to recruit fifteen more men to kill me. He warned them that if they failed to bring proof of my death, then his son's body will be delivered to him. The kidnappers apparently demanded only one thing from the mafia leader. To deliver me to them, dead or alive.

I contacted the *Solntsevskaya* Brotherhood and asked for help. It was an organized crime group based in Russia but I knew they could help me. I needed to know who had hired Kirill to kill me. I knew it was the same group or person that had kidnapped the Odessa mafia clan leader's son in order to make him use his men to kill me. I began to suspect that Richard may have had something to do with the attacks on my person. This was not the first time he had hired Russian nationals to assassinate me. He had previously recruited my friends from the Siberian orphanage and convinced them to kill me. He knew my weakness. He knew I would never hurt a fellow Russian, even if my own life was in danger.

It seemed that Richard was once more exploiting my feelings for my mother's homeland. I knew it was not Kirill's fault that he was trying to kill me. For him, it was either me or his son's life, and like every father in the world, he should prefer his son over me, but I vowed to bring the child back from the kidnappers and deliver him to his father unharmed.

It took me another three days to locate Kirill's son. The boy was alive but malnourished. I captured one of the kidnappers. He admitted to being a member of Blacksand, Richard's private security consulting company that the US military had disavowed years ago. I also learned that the assassination attack on the Odessa clan leader weeks earlier was not an act of a rival gang. The intended target was not the mafia leader; it was me. The killers had somehow followed me to the theater and planned to murder me there, but luckily, I survived and was able to ensure the clan leader remain unharmed.

My head throbbed steadily as I replayed the hectic scene that took place in the past five days. My life was in mortal danger and the people who were sent to kill me were my very own countrymen, my comrades. It hurt terribly when my enemies hired fellow Russians to kill me.

I eagerly seized a bottle of painkiller from my car's glove compartment, but after a moment, unhappily dropped the porcelain tablets on the seat. My physicians had warned me not to take aspirins or Tylenol because of the extensive liver damage I was already suffering from. I had to endure the headache. In a way, I was glad to feel the pain. At least, it was physical agony, something temporary. However, the feelings of betrayal that spiked in my heart were unbearable.

I delivered the Blacksand contractor along the boy to Kirill and told him he no longer had to obey the order of assassinating me. The Odessa mafia clan leader was overjoyed to be reunited with his son.

I could walk freely again.

September, 2017

"Viktor!" I shouted. There was no reply so I made my way to the first floor of the building. Another wall had collapsed, sending debris in my direction. I was engulfed in a swirling cloud of dust but I again called my friend.

This time, I heard a familiar groan of pain. The sound came from the alleyway several feet ahead. I ran to the source. The dry icy air burned my nose and I squinted through the mist to find out who had been hit.

It was my friend! He was wounded.

Viktor was lying in the pavement, his right knee bent at an awkward angle. It must have been broken! A gaping hole over his left thigh was soaked in fresh blood.

I tore my shirt and used it as a tourniquet on his leg. This halted Viktor's bleeding temporarily. I hurriedly proceeded to patch his injury. I knew he would not survive in this condition for too long. This man needed urgent medical attention and instant surgery. I dialed the emergency numbers in vain. The receptors were malfunctioning. I balanced Viktor's head on my lap and howled in frustration. Why was there no one around to help my friend?

I could not imagine why the cell phone was not functioning. During my time at the NSA, I heard that the Department of Homeland Security created a failsafe system in place to take control of the cell infrastructure in case of an emergency. They reserved the authority to divert or deactivate cell phone lines and disrupt communication. Someone must have hacked it and activated the switch. I had no way to call for help.

The incoming snowstorm was drowning my cries of desperation. I gently placed his head on the ground and tried to call for help again. I ran in circles, hysterically brandishing my cellular phone over my head, hoping to get a signal, but the wind must have knocked out the nearest cell tower because I couldn't hear a dial tone. There was no signal at all. I returned to my friend. His usual gray skin had become pale. The former German special force operative was slipping into coma. He would not survive without immediate treatment.

I made a heart wrenching decision. As much as my heart yearned to remain with him, my brain screamed to seek assistance. I knew a pay phone was less than a kilometer away. I could call for the police and get medical support for my wounded friend. I ran my hand gently over Viktor's forehead, promising him I would return without delay. Then I began to sprint to the pay phone.

The 911 call went through without delay. I begged the operator to send an ambulance immediately to this location. The woman assured me help was on the way. Awash with relief, I made my way back to the same spot where I had left Viktor.

The pavement was bare.

My friend was gone! Only a dark stain remained over the sidewalk where he had been lying.

"Viktor!" I screamed so loudly that my throat hurt. "Viktor?"

My voice echoed in the void and the wind seemed to carry it away to nothingness. Where could he have gone? Viktor was in position to move, let alone remove his injured body to such a distance as to be out of earshot. My heart sank with the realization. This must have been a setup. Someone probably preplanned all this- the tampering of the mobile phone, disabling the cell towers, wounding my friend with a life-threatening injury: all of it was to make me get away from this area so they could abduct him! But why? Why would someone want to capture the former *Kommando Spezialkräfte* operative? By this time, the police had arrived. The EMT were surprised to see me. They were told a gravely wounded man required immediate medical attention. I looked at them helplessly. How could I explain to the ambulance driver that the man he was supposed to pick up was abducted by an unknown assailant? Would I even sound believable? I mumbled a faint apology and wanted to get as far away from the area as possible but the EMT wanted to give me a ride in their ambulance. I was apparently suffering from mild hypothermia.

The minute I was released from the ambulance, I contacted my tech op. Joe could not comprehend what I was trying to say.

"Hey, what do you mean Viktor is gone?"

"Joe, he disappeared." I repeated. "I don't know where he is."

"Okay," the computer hacker said slowly. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"I was in Alexandria Bay. Viktor and I went there to locate a suspected a bombmaker who was making a purchase."

"Give me a sec," Joe interrupted. "Okay, I'm looped into the satellite over the Thousand Islands region of northern New York. Is that where Viktor disappeared?"

"We were ambushed. Viktor was trading fire, got wounded severely. I was inside the weapons storage building, took out the two shooters but by the time I got outside, Viktor was out cold."

"So, he was with you the whole time?"

"I wasn't getting cell reception so I went to a pay phone to call 911. When I got back, Viktor was gone. Not a trace of him anywhere."

"This is bad," Joe said suddenly.

"What's bad?" I demanded.

"I can't track Viktor," my hacker friend confessed apologetically. "The satellite over the region was re-tasked during the time your friend was taken. There is no way I can track him now."

I stood frozen, the blood draining from my face. Suppressing a shudder, I answered Joe. "Do you remember the mission Viktor carried out against a section of the Georgian mafia?"

Joe answered instantly. "Yeah, he was undercover for a week until they busted his skull. He almost died, didn't he?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "In order to check for brain damage, the hospital made him undergo an electroencephalogram. Do you think you can access the EEG recording?"

"I think so," Joe said, his voice spiking. "Are you suggesting what I think you are?"

"I remember you told me something about being able to track brainwaves," I admitted to the hacker. "I forgot how it worked."

"John, you are awesome," my tech op exclaimed. "Of course, I remember. Every individual has a signature brain wave pattern which is as unique as the fingerprint. That way, if we know what the brainwaves of an individual looks like, we could technically locate them. Well, not we, but the Defense Department folks can."

"How exactly do they manage that?"

"Well, when I was working at Caltech, the Deputy Secretary of Defense gave us a speech in which he described how the DOD developed and an experimental satellite network that is capable of reading brainwaves from orbit by conducting remote encephalography on subjects."

"How can I get access to the satellite network?" I asked the hacker.

Joe's voice faltered. "I honestly don't know. But if you knew someone on the inside, someone who works at the Defense department, then you could. Maybe."

"Thanks, Joe." I hit the end button and dialed my contact at the DOD.

It took me another hour to get in touch with Ethan Crowley, my former Navy SEAL partner who was now the Commandant of the Marine Corps and wielded significant authority in the Department of Defense. After explaining to him what had happened to my friend, I told Ethan that if I didn't find Viktor soon, he may be tortured to death. Ethan agreed to help me and asked me to email him the EEG readings. He proceeded to uplink Viktor's electroencephalogram reading to the Defense satellite network and promptly gave me a location. It was an address in Manhattan's Upper East Side.

Not wanting to waste any time in rescuing my friend, I borrowed a helicopter from Ethan and arrived at the specific address. It was an under construction building close to the Central Park. I ordered the pilot to drop me on the rooftop. As I lowered myself, I noticed an inert human figure lying on the unfinished roof. I unharnessed myself as fast as I could and rushed to the man. The dark gray hair and unmistakable gray pallor told me it my dear friend Viktor.

"Viktor," I breathed in relief as I made my way over to him.

My friend stirred upon hearing my voice. He rose unsteadily and balanced himself against the low rooftop railing. I noticed his legs were thoroughly bandaged. But there was a bulging jacket over his chest that looked almost like a heavy duty bullet proof vest.

"Viktor?" I repeated worriedly.

My friend looked at me with rapidly blinking eyes. I knew he was trying to hold back tears.

"Viktor, talk to me?" I pleaded, trying to navigate between the steel rods that held the two sides of the roof together and reach him.

"Don't try to come near, John," Viktor said in a ragged voice. "I've been strapped with sixteen pounds of military grade TNT. It is rigged to explode."

"Just hold tight, buddy. I am going to disarm it."

"No, the bomb is pulse sensitive. Trying to deactivate or disarm it will detonate the charges. The blast radius in twenty feet. You shouldn't come any nearer."

"Well, then I'll call a bomb squad," I assured my friend, trying to keep my voice calm, as though everything was under control. I didn't want Viktor to know my heart was bursting in terror and anticipation. "First, I'm going to bring you to ground level so the specialists can get that vest off you."

"John, you don't understand. The bomb will detonate if I try to remove the vest. There is nothing you can do now."

"Like hell," I retorted. "Hold on, Viktor, I am coming and disarming it myself."

"It will explode," my friend protested weakly. "I've tried to disable it. I know."

"I don't care! If it explodes, then we'll have to find out what afterlife is like- together." I took long strides and crossed over the narrow beams, avoiding the gaping holes that showed the unfinished bottom floors of the under-construction building.

"John, you have been a good friend," Viktor spoke a little louder. I looked at him and saw that he was holding a semi-automatic pistol.

"What are you doing?"

Viktor shook his head sadly. "I cannot let you harm yourself. Don't come any closer."

"Or what?"

Viktor raised his weapon and aimed directly at me.

"So, now what? You're gonna shoot me?"

"You gave me a chance at a new life after I was supposed to die. You gave my life meaning. I have lived long enough, and thanks to you I had the chance to do more good than most people do in their entire life."

I froze in shock. This sounded so unlike him. "Viktor, what are you talking about?"

"You live. Do what you do. Save people. Just not me. Not today," my friend grimaced. "I want to thank you for giving me a second chance, for letting me help people."

"You can thank me later, after I get that vest off you, okay." I took several quick strides towards Viktor. We were now less than ten yards apart.

"Stay back," Viktor repeated quietly. "I won't let you die in vain."

"That's too bad," I shot back. "It's not your choice. I'm coming over to you and disarming the bomb whether you like it or not."

"Yes," Viktor said suddenly. He sounded wistful. "You are right. It's not my choice. But this is."

I looked up in time to see what he was doing. The former German special force operative was raising the pistol to his own head.

"NO!" I yelled. "What are you doing?"

"If I am dead, you won't have to disarm this bomb," Viktor said, nodding at me. "Thank you, my friend."

The pistol went off deafeningly. I squeezed my eyes shut, unwilling to witness the horror that had unfolded before my eyes. When I finally cracked my lids apart, I saw the mangled corpse of my dear friend lying only yards away from me. Viktor had fatally shot himself in the temple. His face looked relaxed, almost as if he had gone to sleep.

My body shook with the sobs that he could not hear. There were so many things I had wanted to talk to him about- so many stories I hoped to share, memories to relive, but all that was gone. My grief was threatening to consume my mind and nothing but revenge could relieve this anguish. I would soon avenge his death.

I was overtaken by a limitless sadness. I was the one who deserved punishment. I should have been the one strapped to the bomb. I should have died- not Viktor. He was a man of integrity and his crystalline heart bore no ill towards others. I never ceased to marvel at his resilience. He put his life at risk to save ordinary people every day. I stopped counting how many times this friend took a bullet for me.

Viktor Schluter died in front of me, strapped to military grade explosives, unable to protect himself from the most pitiable fate. When he fired the pistol into his own temple, the gunshot wound disfigured his face, leaving behind mangled flesh and bones.

Viktor's demise devastated me yet I had to suffer from a solitary grief. Officially, neither Viktor nor I existed on any global databases. We were ghosts. Our work necessitated this. We lived under aliases and holding a public funeral for my friend would mean him resurfacing from the dead. The government agencies would be alerted. There would be too many questions. My enemies would use it as an opportunity to inflict maximum casualty upon those I loved. As much as it grieved me, I couldn't mourn him properly. I couldn't bury his body with the dignity he deserved. I couldn't give him a magnificent headstone. I couldn't hold an extended service for the dear friend who carried out the ultimate sacrifice in order to save my life. But what pained me most was that I couldn't answer to his family.

In the three years that I had known him, Viktor spoke very little about them.

We were professional spies working to protect people of all nationalities, race and faith. What we did put our lives at risk and jeopardized those we were close to. In this world, the less one knew, the safer it was for all parties. As a result, Viktor and I rarely talked about our life beyond the missions. We never shared information beyond what was necessary. Only after he was gone did I realize what sort of man he really was. His strength and resilience were unmatched. I cannot fathom how a human being could have so much patience in their heart. No matter how severe a torture he was made to undergo, Viktor never gave in. He never broke under the harshest interrogations.

But it was his undying loyalty to the end that swelled my heart with pride while simultaneously shattering it. He killed himself because he wouldn't let me die. I had known him for three years, yet now, it felt as though he had been my lifelong friend. And from his actions during the final moments, it seemed that Viktor knew me well by then. He knew I would never follow logic. He knew my brain would become irrational and I would disregard my safety if I thought his life could be saved. He knew I would try to disarm the bomb even if there was no chance to stop the timer. And he made his final decision based on his knowledge.

My brain replayed the scene a thousand times. And each time, the pain was as raw as the first time. I could picture him standing there, pistol drawn, turning the weapon on himself. The former German special force operative was not habitually suicidal; yet, he sacrificed himself without hesitation in order to stop me from approaching him.

My heart ached so terribly every time I thought about how imprudently Viktor's life had to end that I vowed to hunt the last person who was remotely responsible for kidnapping my dear friend and strapping him with a bomb and a countdown timer. At times, I felt incapable of revenge; my heart was damaged, broken into too many pieces. I wanted to toss aside my bullet resistant jacket and walk out in the open, under full display to all the surveillance cameras so that those who destroyed my only friend's life could kill me with a hundred bullets. I wished they would stab me to death so I wouldn't have to feel the pain of losing a friend like Viktor, because he was much more than a friend. He was like a brother to me.

Even as I longed for death and wished my pain would end soon, I hesitated. Viktor died so that I could live and carry on his work. He gave his life so that I could win and bring justice to at least some parts of the world. I knew this was what was likely going through his mind, but in all honesty, I no longer wanted to carry the beacon of justice. I didn't feel enthusiastic about bringing any peace or justice in this hate-filled world. It was a crazed arena, where a good man like Viktor is strapped to bombs and driven to suicide. I wanted to forget about equality and peace. All my heart desired was to kill all those who were responsible for my friend's death.

For several days, I wailed and cried with no distractions. When the agony became unbearable, I drowned my sorrows in bottles of luscious wine Viktor had stored in our safehouse. For over a week, I couldn't bear to log into my main channel and receive updates from my tech op. Joe must have called hundreds of times but I didn't have the heart to reply. The computer programmer from Caltech left audio messages but didn't reply because I couldn't speak. I needed closure so I visited the one place I dreaded the most.

I stood by the head stone, I felt my eyesight became weak with the tears that flowed incessantly. It seemed surreal that my dear friend Viktor was buried under the cold dust beneath my feet. At times, it was too painful to linger by his grave so I walked away,

wanting to leave the sadness behind but I couldn't abandon my friend to his unknown fate below the gray tombstone. I returned to the fresh grave and knelt to be closer to him. I spoke quietly, assuring my friend he will never be forgotten, vowing to find the killers who stole his precious life.

"I will always remember you as a soldier who died trying to protect others. You will be avenged!" Then lowering my voice, speaking barely above a whisper, I uttered the words that had long been bursting from my chest. "Forgive me, Viktor. Forgive me for not knowing how to save you."

I waited for a long time, hoping that wherever he was in the afterlife, my friend would hear me and understand that I would have done anything to trade places with him. My friend was dead. He couldn't speak to me anymore.

I wondered why the dead couldn't talk. It was grossly unfair. But then maybe they knew things about death that the living does not have the privilege to learn. But my heart knew somehow – that he could hear my voice.

Although I preferred to have cats as pets, I felt more and more attached to Schatzi. It was as though I still had a part of Viktor with me. I could imagine that my friend was not entirely gone from my life. After Viktor's death, I took on the full responsibility of taking care of the dog. I walked and fed her at the same time of the day so her schedule would not change abruptly, but despite my efforts, she seemed to be suffering from separation anxiety.

I didn't know how to recreate his memory without entirely obliterating the grief that came along with it. It was not possible. I sought solace in the company of Schatzi. The German Saarloos wolfdog seemed to understand her best friend was no longer with us. She began to spend more time with me, loitering about my chair as I worked on my computer. Viktor had been gone for a little over a week now and the dog began to dutifully follow me closely, even if I headed out to purchase food.

On Sunday nights, I would visit my dear friend's resting place without fail. Schatzi would accompany me. I do not know till this day how the animal sensed that her owner was lying beneath the dust, but her facial expressions astounded me. Schatzi moaned, spreading her paws affectionately over the headstone, making mournful sounds and gazing up at me with those intelligent almond-shaped eyes. It seemed that the dog wanted to know if it was true, if it *was* indeed her master lying beneath the headstone. I knelt to meet her eyes. Was it tears I saw in those dark eyes?

I ruffled Schatzi's wide triangular ears and spoke softly. "Viktor was my friend too. I miss him as much as you do."

Schatzi dropped on her stomach and stretched her legs outward, protectively covering Viktor's resting place. The dog seemed determined to remain with her owner. It took me nearly an hour to persuade the animal to accompany me back to the safe house. But I knew how significant this bonding must have been so every week, I brought Schatzi along with me to the grave and allowed the dog to mourn her owner along with me. Thereafter, in order to cheer her, I treated her with her favorite dog biscuits and peanut butter. I hoped to maintain this practice as long as I lived. This much I owed my friend, the man who selflessly sacrificed his own life so that I could survive.

For three years, Viktor saved my life and shielded me from bullets. But I never thanked him. I never enquired about his family, never shared a meal, and never told him about my life or my real identity. He appeared reserved and private so I always gave him space, not wanting to break professionalism. But after his death, I regretted being so distant. I wish I had thanked him once for saving my life, for risking his life in the job every day.

During all the time I worked alongside Viktor, I never saw him falter. He never demanded a single payment from me, never asked for money nor took breaks or vacations. Our work was demanding. It required jumping in front of bullets to save strangers, people who

would never learn of your existence, people who might treat you condescendingly, but Viktor never got tired of saving them. He was devoted to everyone equally. I never expressed gratitude to him, never hugged him or even shook his hand. I don't know why I was apprehensive, but maybe I thought he was a cold person. Only after he died for me did I feel the burning pain of regret. There is no greater grief in this world than the agony of fresh regret for a loved one who was lost and gone forever. I knew that no matter how powerful I become in the future, or how much wealth I accumulate, I would never be able to laugh without thinking of his life, without remembering how he worked so hard to save ordinary people but could not live to see the fruit of his work.

When I finally returned to work, I tasked Joe with one job: locate Viktor's next of kin.

Joe got back to me in record time. He discovered that Viktor Schluter was survived by three sons and a wife. Court record showed they were still married but separated. She was listed as living with a partner. Her father-in-law had custody of the children. I was a little surprised to hear that. Viktor never mentioned a wife nor spoke about his father. I never heard him speak of his children either. But he was a very private person, so it was understandable.

I contemplated on what I should do. Viktor's wife had no idea where he was or what his profession was. I doubted if she knew whether he was dead or alive. But he was my friend and I felt it was my duty to look after his family and children. I also wanted to open up a charity in his name but first I needed to ensure his family was safe. I wrote down the address Joe had downloaded from the German directory and sent a document with specific instructions to a New York law office. The Trust and Estate Planning attorneys there were told exactly what to do with the documents and corresponding bank accounts.

I then proceeded to fly to Frankfurt. Viktor's father lived in the Offenbach district of Hesse. It took me an hour to locate the residential apartment building.

"Wer ist da?" A feeble voice called from the other side.

I didn't know how to reply. The door opened and a man with graying hair and rimless glasses stood at the threshold. He was flanked by two adolescents.

I spoke quickly in Deutsche, explaining to the elderly man that I was a friend of his son.

"Viktor?" He said quizzically and invited me in.

"Wo sind deine Enkel?" I asked him. Joe had hinted that Viktor's children were living with their grandfather in Frankfurt.

The old man smiled eagerly and introduced the young children: Horst, Karl and a he gushed proudly about Lothar, the third son who was at school.

I took a deep breath and told him the news about Viktor's death, trying to give as little information as possible. He looked composed and asked a few questions about Viktor's life in America. I told him he left a trust fund for the children and a lawyer would forward the details to him soon.

His sitting room was richly decorated, with wall hangs covering the blank areas. I noticed a large portrait perched on the center table and asked whose picture that was. Horst was eager to show me the picture. It was a photo of my dear friend. Viktor must have been a fresh graduate of the German military academy when the picture was taken. I felt moved to see remnants of his legacy sitting in this obscure house. I commented in an offhand manner that Viktor would have liked his portrait to adorn one of the walls of the house in which his children lived in. Viktor's father agreed and promised to have it restored.

Before I left the apartment, a teenager stood in front of me. His was scowling fiercely. *"Ich vermisse meinen Papa."* It must have been Lothar, Viktor's eldest son. He had inherited the deep gray eyes and vivid pallor from his father. The young boy wanted to know where his father was.

I told him that his father was busy trying to save the lives of little boys and girls like him. I explained that his father was a hero who died trying to make the world safer for him. This brought a small smile to his face. The adolescents who had seemed largely distant now trailed behind me and were standing silently in the lobby. I hesitated, and tried to add a few words of comfort. But nothing I could say lessened the grief in their lost faces.

"Your father was my best friend," I said at last. *"He loved you."*

Viktor's youngest son ran forward and wrapped his arms around me. Somehow the boy believed me. He had no idea that his father was dead because of me. He died in order to save my life. Guilt burned inside me and I was nearly crying. I was the reason these children were orphan. They did not deserve to lose such a noble father.

Sensing my grief, the other two boys moved nearer. I extended my arms and gathered them in a group hug. I promised to be back. Before leaving, I gave their grandfather my word that I would look after Viktor's son as though they were my own. The old man's eyes shone with humility and kindness. He nodded wordlessly and walked me to the door. I did not want them to witness me dissolving in

tears so I left hurriedly and contacted Joe. The scientific programmer promised to mail all the bank documents to Viktor's apartment without delay.

I traveled to Germany intending to pay my respect to the surviving family members of dear Viktor but I had not anticipated how difficult it would be to deliver the news of his demise to his elderly father. How can you tell an ailing man that his only son was dead? People are emotional creatures and in order to accept inevitable pain, they need closure. They need to know the when and why. But I could not tell them. I could not tell Viktor's teenage boys that their father died a hero, that he took his own life so that I would not have to risk mine.

I could not tell them how Viktor had spent the past four years risking his life on a daily basis to save American lives. How proud they would have been if they the truth about Viktor's missions and activities, and how he selflessly sacrificed everything for strangers! Viktor never demanded monetary compensation from me- saving human lives was not his job; it was his mission.

If they knew that only eight months ago, Viktor spent six weeks undercover, infiltrating a street gang in Bronx and succeeded in identifying the leaders of the criminal organization. He discovered that the gang ran a drug smuggling ring in the southwest portion of the Bronx and recruited children from the outer borough working class and low-income neighborhoods in the city. The gang leaders often coerced runaway children and teenagers who lived in foster care to transport drugs and other dangerous weapons for them. Viktor had been personally invested in halting the growth of such groups and at a great personal risk, he was able to assist the NYPD in dismantling the entire crime syndicate. Once the police had arrested the gang leaders, there were scores of children scattered about the streets of Bronx, who had no guardians or role model. They were a vulnerable group that were susceptible to criminal gangs and drug use. Viktor remained in the area for several weeks and personally mentored many teenagers in Bronx. He gave them basketball lessons, boxing training, and even helped many children return to high school.

Viktor also managed to secure reliable foster families for seventeen African-American children who were living in the streets after running away from the juvenile centers. After returning from his undercover work, Viktor told me how he had been appalled by the mistreatment some of the children had suffered in the state youth centers that he wanted to adopt the children himself but I had to gently remind him that the work we did had no room for such luxuries. Instead of adopting the children, Viktor personally vetted each foster family and dropped them off in their new homes. He allowed me to accompany him in that parting journey and as I sat in the car, I noticed even the older adolescents clutching to Viktor and weeping. The children had bonded so well with him that they were reluctant to leave him and stay with the adopted family. The sight of Viktor bidding the children farewell was an emotional scene which reduced me to tears.

A friend I had known for years was living in London at this time. When he heard that I was in Berlin, he invited me to his house for the wedding ceremony of his only child. I generally deflected invitations and avoided socializing, but I remembered who he was. Assistant Commissioner of the City of London Police, Russell Shirley.

But in 2000, when I had first met him, Russell was a senior British police officer who had assisted me in preventing a car bomb from detonating outside a London opera house. It was one of the fiercest gun battle I had faced since leaving the Soviet training Camp. I later learned that they had been Serb veterans of the Kosovo War of 1999, when NATO troops bombarded and defeated them and forced the Serbian army commanders to face charges at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The assailants who had attacked me in London were armed with sophisticated weapons and seemed prepared to fight to death. Their target was the British Prime Minister who had been a vocal supporter of the NATO air war against the Serbs and encouraged the international community to support Americans in the Operation Allied Force.

I had suspected that the PM's energetic support of the war against the Serbs had caused these Serbian former military men to attack him, but I was wrong. As Russell and I tailed the British PM's motorcade and inspected nearby crowds for signs of hostility, we were unaware that just kilometers from our location, six Serbian militias were bundling the PM's sons into an unmarked van and speeding away. By the time Dustin informed me that there had been a kidnapping near the opera house where the twin boys were visiting with their mother, it was too late. Russell and I rushed to the spot but the kidnappers had already taken the two boys. We followed their trail for several kilometers and were almost closing in on them when the abductors noticed us.

We were pursuing the Serbian mercenaries on full speed when they tossed a grenade at us. Russell's police car had better brakes and he was able to swerve out of the path of the grenade's trajectory, but the magnetic grenade struck my car and exploded before I could exit. I was trapped under a burning vehicle when Russell noticed the upturned car and came to my rescue. He suffered second degree burns on his arms and shoulder but he managed to pull me out.

After two hours of car chase, we finally tracked the kidnappers to an industrial area. It was hopelessly barren and we searched one building after another and could not locate the prime minister's twins. My friend Dustin contacted me again and told me that he was

picking up signals of a live broadcast only two hundred yards from my location. I was curious. Which news media would venture into this industrial zone of London and air live news?

I discreetly entered the building. It had a derelict appearance and looked abandoned. But then I heard the earsplitting shrieks of frightened children. Russell and I ran to the source and found the two boys tightly bound inside a metal cage. Two militiamen were pouring gasoline over their bodies while another was standing guard at a distance. Russell edged to the third man and noiselessly overpowered him.

I noticed a camera set up against the wall. It was fitted on a tripod and a tall man was adjusting the lenses. By the time he noticed my presence, I had already charged headfirst at him and knocked the camera to the ground. I grabbed him in a headlock but he used his free arm to reach into his pocket. The man removed a cigarette lighter and attempted to toss it at the petrol filled cage, but before he could light it, I seized the lighter from his hand. He struggled and cursed me, and said I ruined his only chance to burn the two boys.

When I finally overpowered the man, I recognized him from the photos of the international criminal court brochure. He was Zoltán Seselj, a suspected war criminal who had been an officer of the Yugoslav army's 189th missile brigade. I expressed my shock to him and begged him to explain why an officer like himself would authorize his gunmen to burn two innocent children to death. Zoltán admitted he had founded the Balkan terrorist group in order to exact justice and said while he did not enjoy killing children, he was trying to send a message to the British Prime Minister and make him feel his pain. The Serb told me how his children died during the NATO bombing of Belgrade. All four of his sons burned to death in the fire that consumed his house. For the past year, he had planned for this revenge and tracked down the people who were responsible for starting the war. Zoltán said he found out that one of the greatest advocates of the Kosovo war was the British leader who encouraged NATO nations to bomb Yugoslavia.

During the war in 1999, when Serbian leader Milosevic rejected NATO calls to withdraw his troops to the barracks and withdraw completely from Kosovo, it was the British prime minister who most ardently advocated for a full air assault on Belgrade. In the months that followed, NATO planes bombarded strategic locations and defeated the Serb forces. While the pilots targeted military installations, many civilians died in those air raids. Including Zoltán Seselj's four sons.

The Serb ultranationalist rogue army officer tried to justify his actions and said he hoped to burn the two boys in the cage and film the event for the entire world's media to see, but I had ruined his plan. I understood the man's pain but tried in vain to make him realize that burning two more children to death would not bring back his sons. While Zoltán spoke with me, Russell was soothing the twins, assuring them that they will be safe now. I told him to contact the prime minister at once and inform him that his twins have been found.

Meanwhile, I noticed the two boys were still trembling in fear, so I tried to calm them by introducing myself and learning their names. The twins were Eugene and Thomas. They were eager to go home so I reassured them and explained that this was a drama show and the man who had kidnapped them were only playing a part in a movie and never meant to harm them. The boys believed me and began to laugh. I knew the truth was too painful for young children like them to bear, so I hoped they could forget about the terrible events that were about to take place. I hoped Eugene and Thomas would never find out that they were moments away from being burned to death. That terrible realization would have scarred them for life.

Russell took the Serbian terrorists into custody and successfully left my name off the police report. We had kept in touch sparingly and only once did he seek my help. It was when his daughter inadvertently got infected with a toxin while working unsupervised at a Belgian lab. On that occasion, Dustin and I managed to procure an antidote from a decommissioned military lab in Ukraine. The girl's life was saved and she did not suffer from any after effects.

Russell Shirley's invitation brought back painful memories I wished never to recall. But before I rejected his request, I thought of my friend Viktor. It was a sad moment for me in life. There was so much to say, but I couldn't tell Viktor's children how noble their father had been. I decided to pay Russell a visit and tell him about my late friend Viktor. Perhaps having someone to share the grief with would have lessened my pain.

When I arrived in London, Russell drove me to his spacious house. It was crowded with wedding guests and housekeepers were decorating tables with food. Russell introduced me to his colleagues and told me he was now the Assistant Commissioner of the City of London Police and finally thanked me profusely for saving his daughter's life. He insisted his daughter was alive today because I saved her life by bringing her the antidote, but I told him it was not I who saved her; it was god who saved her using me. If I hadn't done it, someone else would have. But Russell chuckled knowingly and led me to the dining hall. He thanked me yet again and went to chat with the other guests.

I wanted to protest, to shout that he was mistaken. Could he not understand that I had no power to save anyone? I couldn't even save Viktor's life! And he was standing only yards away from me, but I couldn't prevent him from dying an agonizing death. If I had the power to save people, then my mother would not be dead today. My friends would be alive. Most of the people I loved and cared about; people I would have given anything to revive were gone. Saving them wasn't up to me.

The aroma of delicate cuisine wafted across the dining hall. Guests were milling about with platters of finger foods, but suddenly I realized I was not hungry. I had been on the road for nineteen hours, including my flight from Berlin, but my appetite was gone.

It happened a lot lately. No matter how delicious the cuisine was, I could barely swallow a single morsel. Even the tastiest food was bland to me. How can you enjoy eating delicacies when all your loved ones are dead? And when everyone you ever cared about are no longer in this world to share these delightful meals with you? My friends like Viktor and Dustin; my beloved mother; my mentor Mikhail and all those children in my Siberian orphanage who looked after me- they deserved these delicacies. They deserved these comforts. They sacrificed their lives for people who would never know their names but now that they have taken leave from this world, without getting a chance to be happy, without being able to enjoy a warm meal or sit peacefully on a beach during sunset, without the fear of death and torture lurking behind every shadow.

Dustin deserved this meal. Viktor deserved this comfort. My mother deserved a tranquil abode by the sea where she could spend her days in comfort. They deserved it. Not me. I didn't deserve it because I could never enjoy any of these comfort without them.

I wondered why the world mocks us in this way. Why do you get money only when you don't need it anymore? Why is it that you get comfort and safety in your life only after your heart ceases to beat? Why is it that you get the chance to sleep on a warm bed only after you have fallen hopelessly into chronic depression? Why do your enemies abandon their pursuit of you only after you start suffering from maniac paranoia and lose the capacity to remain calm?

It was cruel for the world to offer you money only after all those you loved had died and there is nothing left to do with the wealth, and no friends to save, no one left to help. How ironic it is that once you have lost all appetite, you are deluged with trays of food. I cannot eat or digest even the finest delicacies. It's hard not to choke when the memories of your loved ones cause tears to well up your eyes. You cannot enjoy anything in this world in this life when all the people you loved are absent; all the people you cherished are gone forever; and all the ones you wanted to save are dead.

"You need to see this." Joe accosted me on my way out.

"Not today," I answered irritably.

For two weeks, the computer hacker had been handing me files that were filled with profiles of people whose lives were in danger. But I couldn't make myself focus on the starch pages; I couldn't gather my thought and find the imaginary perpetrators when *my* partner's killers were still in the loose, breathing fresh air, while Viktor lay suffocated under the cold earth, dead and buried for no other reason except that he was my friend. I would not let them walk away.

The tech op from Caltech cleared his throat again, trying to get my attention.

I scratched the stubble on my chin. "We talked about this, Joe. I'm not taking any new cases until those who did this to Viktor are jailed for life. I swore I would find every last person who was responsible for destroying his life, and I intend to do just that."

"I know, man," Joe said soothingly. "That's why I've been trying to stop you. I got a lead."

I froze. "What?"

Joe spoke hurriedly. "Do you remember Clarissa Shetland? The senior technician at the Burlington Nuclear Generating Station."

"The Canadian woman?" I repeated. "Your app flagged her messaged and concluded that her life was in danger so we sent Viktor to be her bodyguard."

"Correct, except one thing. I had her phone cloned during the operation. And guess what? The threatening messages she had been receiving were coming from a device she owned herself."

I did not understand what the hacker was trying to tell me. "What are you implying?"

"I think Shetland played us," Joe said simply. "She made it *look* as though her life was at risk so that we would come to her rescue. Well, in this case, go to her rescue."

"Joe, you make sense- in theory only," I sighed. "There were real people attacking her. Viktor told me how he had to fight off six or seven armed assailants. Besides, how on earth would she know that we track global communication satellites? She couldn't have known we have a system in place to track phone calls and emails and find people who are potential targets."

"She did. I don't know how, but I think the woman was in our trail long before we flagged her communication lines. Shetland set up a long trail for us to follow. I admit, my app was fooled big time."

"How could someone be so thorough?" I wondered aloud. "She was a mere technician."

"Well, maybe this explains it. Clarissa Shetland isn't her real name. It's an alias she assumed when she took the job at the nuclear power station."

"What was she before that?"

“She lived in her hometown of Quebec City and worked for an import export company called the League something- yeah, it’s *Trēdecim*.”

“League 13.” I said abruptly.

Joe looked surprised. “That’s right. How did you know?”

“Because I used to work for League 13. Years ago. Before I met you.”

“What is it?” Joe asked quietly.

“It is a black ops division of the NSA, controlled by an Austrian-Hungarian man named Reinhard. He operated in America under the assumed name Richard. He uses fronts- like export import or insurance companies and hides behinds shell corporation.”

“How did you get to know him?” Joe’s eyes shone with curiosity.

“It’s a long story,” I said curtly. “Let’s say he helped me get out of a very precarious situation and I thought I owed him my life for that.”

“Where is this Richard now?”

“He is a fugitive, an international terrorist responsible for carrying out numerous acts of terror, including the 2015 Paris bombings. When he was still an active member of the NSA, Richard created a private security firm called the Blacksand. They were military contractors who had operated in Iraq and Afghanistan. Richard profited immensely from these deals, but soon, his mercenaries began to kill too many civilians in Iraq. Even for the military, it was too much violence, even for our soldiers in Iraq, so the Senate Intelligence Committee canceled the military contract and ordered Richard to disband his firm.”

“I’m assuming he didn’t disband them?”

“He transferred the team.”

“Where?”

“To China.” I stated. “Or at least part of them. Now that you found out about Clarissa Shetland, I am guessing Richard has a small base in Canada as well. It is very much like him to spread Blacksand’s tentacles over America’s neighbors.”

“That’s interesting,” Joe remarked. “Anyway, I think I know what Clarissa was after. It appears she specifically targeted us- or more precisely, you.”

“How?”

“My software flagged her number because she put the hit on herself. John, she knew how we operate. Somehow, she found out you would show up and try to save her if she made us believe her life was in danger.”

“Why would she want to lure me out?”

“Maybe someone she works for wanted you, but their plans went haywire when Viktor volunteered for the op instead of you.”

“Joe, please, I know all this sounds interesting, but I am really not enthusiastic to learn about how sneaky some Canadian woman was. I am looking for people who may have been responsible for my best friend’s death and I intend to find them.”

“That’s exactly why I brought up the Shetland woman’s case,” Joe mumbled. “Although most of the data on her company’s servers were corrupted, I’ve been keeping track of her phone.”

“Since when?” I found it hard to believe that the hacker would be capable of keeping track the lives of the hundreds of people I had managed to save.

“Since Viktor got back from Canada,” Joe was speaking quickly. He avoided eye contact. “I just thought I had to be sure. You know.”

I shook my head. “Sure of what?”

“Well, the biometric tracker on Viktor’s phone showed a pattern.”

“Wait.” I raised my hand, trying to process my thoughts. “Don’t lie to me, Joe. Are you saying you kept tabs on Viktor without his knowledge? That is unacceptable.”

“It was only for his protection, I swear. I wanted to make sure he was safe- so that I could send help, or let you know if there were signs of trouble. Viktor never asked for backup or any sort of help- you know, how Germans are.”

“What did you find?”

“Every Saturday, Viktor would take a direct flight to Montréal-Trudeau and take a cab to a private house in the residential neighborhood located in the borough of Saint-Laurent in Montreal. I was able to find the name of the owner. Here is the photo of the house owner’s ID.” Joe pressed a palm sized paper in my hand.

I squinted to clear my vision. The unmistakable straight blonde hair. The round face. “Clarissa Shetland?”

Joe nodded. He looked grim. “Except she used an alias when purchasing the property.”

“What was Viktor doing with her? His mission was over weeks ago.”

“Satellite images from around that time show the two of them taking long strolls down the park, eating at a restaurant.”

“So, they were in a relationship?” I asked, without waiting for an answer. “But that is irrelevant. Viktor’s personal life is none of our business.”

“Maybe not, but it was you who said you wanted to find out everything that happened in the final hours leading to his death. I was just trying to help you.”

“Clarissa Shetland has nothing to do with his death. I am sure of that.” I reiterated, folding my arms as I stood contemplating on the word Joe had uttered. “There is nothing unusual about the affair. Viktor was her bodyguard and protected her from many attackers. It is natural to form a bond.”

Joe whistled bitterly. “Viktor protected her from attacks she had ordered on herself in order to gain his trust.”

“What other proof do you have?”

“The device that Viktor was strapped to- the explosives. I recovered several prints from the casings. Whoever strapped in on him were careless.”

“They were counting on the thing to explode,” I remembered morosely. “Fingerprints were obviously not supposed to be recovered from the debris.”

“Yeah, lucky me. One of the prints was a positive match. Belongs to a man who was recently released on probation from Attica Correctional Facility. He is a technical explosives expert and was suspected - without conviction- of detonating three bombs in a Denver shopping mall. Do you want to know who posted his bail money after his arrest?”

I looked stoically at the hacker and didn’t speak. “A woman named Claire Southern, AKA Clarissa Shetland.”

“You are positive that explosive expert placed the bomb on Viktor?” My voice constricted with emotion. “Where can I find him?”

“I’m working on it,” Joe assured me. “Will let you know as soon as I have a location.”

The address Joe supplied me with did not exist. I followed the GPS until it led me into a small clearing in upstate New York. The place was surrounded by shrubbery. Not a soul was in sight.

I scoured the location for hours until the trap door creaked beneath my feet. It was an underground criminal hub! I pried the metal covering and made my way down the hole. On my way to the main room, I glued small boxes of explosive charges to the beams. This would be my insurance during egress.

As expected, the bomb makers were huddled around a card table. They did not notice me entering. I held one hostage and injured the three other men. While they writhed in agony, I retrieved their phones and other electronic devices before bolting for the exit. I knew they would try to follow me, and when they did, the blasting agents would detonate, causing the beams to collapse and trap them in their own hell-hole.

I returned to the temporary operating center Joe had set up in Stamford and handed the gadgets to him. The hacker got to work and for two days, he filtered every byte of data from the bombers’ cell phones. It was the third day that he discovered a jackpot.

“A recording?” I clarified. “And you found it on the explosive expert’s phone?”

Joe repeated the details of his findings and told me to listen to the tape in its entirety. “Voice imprints are still being analyzed, John, but I am hundred percent sure I heard Viktor’s voice in the background.”

I needed to hear no more and rushed to Joe’s computer lab. He offered me a seat in one of his inflatable armchairs but I declined. “I need to know what you found, Joe.”

“Right.” Joe typed in a command on his computer and the speaker cracked into life. “You probably know, smart phones record everything that happens around them. That is even when the device is off. I gleaned this excerpt from the phone of the bomber whose fingerprints were on the bomb vest Viktor was strapped with. This was from around the time our German friend went missing.”

The recording began with tremendous static, then the voices became clearer.

“Where am I?” It was Viktor’s deep hoarse voice.

“Honey, I brought you to a clinic. You are safe.”

“Clarissa?” Viktor seemed to have trouble speaking. His words were slurred. “What are you- How did you find me?”

“You were ill,” the calm female voice echoed from the speaker.

“No, help me up. I have to go back.” Viktor was speaking urgently.

“Everything is okay,” the woman repeated.

“A friend needs my help,” Viktor continued. “I must go.”

“You need to lie still, Viktor, while the doctor patches you up.”

“What are you doing?” Viktor suddenly sounded worried. “My leg is wounded. I don’t need gauze on my chest.”

“Viktor, please let the doctor do his work.”

“Why is he putting the heavy waist belt on me?” The former KSK operative was speaking coherently now.

“You fractured several ribs,” Clarissa Shetland’s voice rang out. “This is just precautionary, to prevent further damage. Try to remain very still.”

“It’s ready,” a clear male voice spoke up. “Will activate on your command.”

The recording faded off after a few moments.

“Joe, what happened after?” I demanded.

The hacker looked flustered. “I’m not sure but it looks like the explosive expert guy must have left the vicinity. No more audio on his device. But I will bet both my computers and juke box that he was talking about the bomb on Viktor’s body when he said it was ready to be activated.”

“But Clarissa Shetland was with Viktor,” I reminded the tech op. “Tap into her phone. I want to know what she did after.”

“You think I didn’t try?” Joe responded. “She either does not have a smart phone or was too smart to leave it around.”

“That was the explosive inside his vest,” I said. My throat tightened again. I was afraid tears would gush from my eyes so I turned my back on the hacker. “Viktor knew they were strapping something on his body. He could do nothing to prevent it. It’s all my fault. I should never have left him unattended.”

“John, you can’t blame yourself. You went to get help.”

“I should’ve known. Viktor was too skilled, too talented to let someone get so close to him and plant an explosive device on his body. But he let his guard down because he knew Clarissa. He trusted that woman. How could she? Why would someone do that?”

My investigation veered slightly off course after I located the woman who was responsible for strapping an explosive vest on my dear friend Viktor. It was at this time I had learned the truth about what really happened. Like the explosive expert who had placed the fatal bomb on Viktor Schluter’s body, Clarissa Shetland was a pawn. The player was someone I knew, someone from my past. Joe had been right. He had noticed this connection weeks earlier.

The Canadian woman worked exclusively for Richard and had acted on his orders. I imagined that targeting Viktor was his way of hurting me, because Richard knew me better than anyone else. Ever since I dated his daughter Cynthia, who was in fact his stepdaughter, Richard had never allowed me a day of peace in my life. He wanted me out of Cynthia’s life and when I refused to be intimidated, he targeted my loved ones, making them suffer in order to punish me for stealing his Cynthia away.

My friends became the victims of his game of vengeance. A dear friend like Viktor died because my enemies wanted to destroy all joy from my life. It was not something one could easily get over from.

I remember driving to a clandestine mission. It was one of my old cars, which I had recycled after a minor crash. Viktor would often drive the muscle car but on this occasion, I decided to take it on a drive.

While maneuvering the car, my eyes fell on the automotive cup holder. There was a paper coffee-cup sitting there. Viktor had purchased that for me before he died. It was the last time he drove this car, I remembered with feelings. He had dropped me off but I had forgotten to take the cup with me. Noticing the paper cup rekindled my grief. It made me realize that my friend was really gone. The memories of working with Viktor came flooding back in my brain and I could no longer drive the car. My hands trembled on the steering wheel as I pulled over beside an empty road and cried to the void.

I hadn’t realized that the smallest incident could jolt your memories and remind one of the loved ones that were gone. I did not understand before that time how important Viktor was to my life. His contribution to my well-being was priceless. I mourned the fact that I never had the chance to express my gratitude to him. I never thanked him properly for what he did for me. He served selflessly, never seeking any compensation, salary or rewards. It was strange why I did not value him as much when he was still alive. I think I was reluctant to trust that man, but after he died in front of my eyes, using his dying breath to save my life. I realized what kind of a noble person he was. It was at that moment I realized that I had lost a friend I may never have again.

The guilt consumes me even now. Viktor should not have died that day. It should have been me. I should have died in his place. It was my fault my enemies that destroyed him.

The tumultuous memories made me sob uncontrollably. I felt as though I had lost my brother- a brother I never had.

When I saw Viktor die, I was certain I would become mad in grief. Tears of rage constantly streamed down my cheeks as I contemplated breaking all my rules. I desired to break all the codes I had set for myself years ago; the vows I had taken about never resorting to violence, or avenging the enemies. I had sworn to myself I would never take revenge because I knew it would ultimately destroy me. But now, I felt like breaking them all and turn into a monster - and make those people face the pain I was feeling. What good does your rules do to you when all your loved ones die in front of you, one by one, and you have no one to live for? I didn’t want to lose

control but my mind was becoming insane. I didn't want to think logically anymore. There was no point. Jail and prison would not be enough for those who crushed my friend's life. They deserved death.

When I found out about Richard's treachery, and how he orchestrated such a lengthy plan to have my friend killed, I wanted to let go off all the principles I stood by for so many years. I reasoned that these rules were futile because while I fought honorably, my enemies had no rules, no honor and no code. I decided to take justice into my own hands and went to hunt down Richard. I no longer had any desire to arrest him. Only death of my greatest foe could bring peace to my grieving heart.

I finally located Richard with the help of my tech op, and cornered him inside his parking garage. Oh, how desperately I wanted to kill him, but I couldn't pull the trigger. As I held him at gun-point, I told him how Viktor died, how he tried to save me. Richard didn't speak, perhaps in the fear of antagonizing me further, but I shook my weapon at him and demanded an explanation. I told him to give me a reason why he had ordered my friend's death. Richard was about to open his mouth to speak when a car pulled up behind me. I spun around and leveled my weapon at the intruder.

It was Cynthia!

Richard's stepdaughter leaped out of her vehicle and trained her gun at me. "Stand down, John."

I couldn't obey her order, not when I was this close to apprehending the man who ordered the hit on my friend.

Richard cleared his throat and told me I should listen to his daughter. There was a sneer playing over his withered old face. The man was gloating inwardly for cheating death and detention. Cynthia shouted her warning again, promising to shoot me but I wasn't listening. In my mind, I was picturing the scene again. My friend lying in a bloody heap, strapped to twenty pounds of military grade explosives, dying so that I could live. I couldn't let Richard get away with this so I made a resolute decision to take him into custody. Although I knew he would strike a clemency deal with intelligence bureaus and find a way to get out of jail in no time, I still wanted to hand him over to the FBI and supply them with all the evidence of his wrongdoings.

I had momentarily lowered my weapon but Richard began to move away. Afraid he might escape yet again, I raised my gun and ordered him to get back. Cynthia shouted again and fired at me. Her bullet seared my shoulder, cutting deep into my bone. I managed to stagger against a parked vehicle and remain on my feet. My gun was in my hands though it now hung uselessly at my side.

She fired again. This time, her bullet penetrated my left kidney, sending shockwaves of pain throughout my body. I fell on the ground, my mind blacking out from agony. From the corner of my eyes, I could see Richard and Cynthia driving away in her car.

I would have died that day had it not been for a janitor who was passing by the parking garage and noticed me lying prone near the exit. By the time the ambulance took me to the hospital, I was barely alive. When I was revived, doctors informed me that they had to administer thirty-two bags of blood in order to keep me alive.

I realized then that insanity is a dangerous thing- more so because it could come over anyone, anytime. And if we let it take control of our faculties, even for a moment, then we will start becoming evil until there will be hardly any difference between us and our enemies.

If I exacted revenge, then what difference would there be between Richard, Clarissa Shetland, and myself? Richard hit me where it hurt the most, but I couldn't let him win. For years, he and his politician friends in Washington espoused openly Russophobic policy and hoped to use it as a leverage against me. With the encouragement from Richard, Washington's manifestations of Russophobia became more overt and emboldened. It pained me to see anti-Russian discrimination becoming a growing phenomenon in the American society but that didn't stop me from trying to save as many lives as I could manage. I gave up love. I sacrificed my friends. I lost my health and nearly had to forgo my sanity yet I had to go on with my work. There were too many people whose lives were at risk. And I had to help them.

I couldn't let Richard take my soul away.

I couldn't let him make me a killer again.

So, I forced myself to digest the pain and hide my screams and tears of grief from the uncharitable world.

Since the day Viktor Schluter died, there was an empty space in my heart, a void I couldn't fill, no matter how hard I tried. I couldn't forgive myself for not being able to save him. All my life, I survived gunshots, bomb explosions, poisonings and brainwashing while those I loved and cared about died one by one. Everyone I depended was taken away from me. Ever since I was a little boy, I lost the people dearest to me. Viktor's demise was the last straw. I didn't think I could take the pain of losing another loved one.

Although I grew up as an orphan, devoid of siblings or family, I loved Viktor like a brother. After his demise, I made a great effort to befriend Schatzi. The wolfdog was a dear creature but I was initially apprehensive of the overbearing animal. For so many years, I had been tortured and interrogated in various parts of the world, and nearly all captors used dogs to intimidate me. I had been bitten by those

animals and often suffered from septic wounds. It was not unreasonable for me to like cats more, but I knew Viktor's dog was a peaceful animal. She would never hurt me. It pleased me greatly to see that the dog reciprocated my love and we became quite close.

Now, all I have left in the world is the dog, the only remnant of the dear friend who gave his life for me.

My friend Cuthbert contacted me that evening to apprise me of the latest development in Central Asia. The media had been reporting that several largescale bombings took place in Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Myanmar. I asked him who was responsible for those attacks, and Cuthbert said the it was Baldassarre Bastico's mercenaries who were carrying out those bombings and framing Arabs and Afghans for it.

I was frustrated. "I understand that Baldassarre Bastico wants to attack America with a nuclear bomb, but why is he trying to frame Afghans for it? Why did he go through all this trouble to make a fake Taliban group to claim responsibility for his attack?"

"He wants to attack America and frame Pakistan to make them take blame. It is not anything personal because it is just convenient for him to blame Moslems. He always hated Moslems."

"Why did he hate Muslims so much?" I asked.

"During the Iraq and Afghanistan war, this guy had been responsible for carrying out several war crimes. He executed fifty-five children in an Afghan village, and also burned several school buildings to the ground."

"Didn't the military punish him for those war crimes?" I wanted to know.

"They placed him on a court martial and reduced his rank, but his lawyers were able to prevent him from serving time in jail. However, ever since he was found guilty of committing war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, this Italian navy commander said he would make sure Muslims are accused of even worse war crimes."

"Is that why he began to rebuild the Taliban group?"

"Yes, but people in Afghanistan who are posing as Taliban fighters are actually mercenaries. They are ex-Moslem Afghans who are paid to pose as Taliban terrorists. The Italian man ordered them to make beheading and rape videos, and claim responsibility for it, so that the world media thinks that Afghans are worse than him and his war crimes."

"This sounds bizarre, almost like the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, in which young Arab men were framed for the destruction of two buildings." I commented before asking, "I don't understand how Richard and his Italian mercenary friends gained access to remote places in Afghanistan, back in 1980."

"Well, Richard was working in a covert unit in the NSA, and he and his Italian employees pretended to be agents of the Central Intelligence Agency and approached a group of Afghans who were ex-Moslems, and those Afghans agreed to call themselves Taliban and do a lot of terroristic activities and publicize a lot of human rights abuses."

"What was the main purpose of creating this group Taliban, back in 1980?" I asked.

"Cynthia's stepfather was very eager to inflict maximum casualty on the Soviet troops that were arriving in Afghanistan to restore order, and he made this rogue group and supplied them with heavy artillery."

"Richard's Italian-American protégé was involved in that?" I wanted to be sure.

"Yes. Richard and Admiral Baldassarre Bastico made those ex-Moslem Afghans take the blame of oppressing women and children, and they also accepted responsibility for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City."

"So, you are saying it was these ex-Moslem groups who were calling themselves Taliban since 1994, and forced women to wear burka or long veils, were actually working for Richard?"

Cuthbert nodded. "Yes, that is correct, except Richard used Bastico to be the point man in the Taliban operations, and one of their main tasks were to claim full responsibility for the September 11, 2001 attacks as soon as it took place. That is why they made a charade of hiding a fictional Ben Laden terrorist."

"I can't believe Richard is using these ex-Moslem Afghans to do all these terrorist activities!"

"Well, he and Bastico have been using this group since 1990. For the past two decades, these war lords and drug dealers and other ex-Moslem factions in Afghanistan have been acting as Richard's personal black ops division. Each time, a member of Richard's undercover operative blows up a building or gets involved in a shootout, these ex-Moslem Taliban fighters immediately take all the blame for the attacks, and they did the same when Richard's agents blew up the World Trade Centers in New York City, and framed some Arab youths for it." Cuthbert paused. "This time, Baldassarre Bastico wants to detonate a nuclear bomb over the nation's capital and make the new Taliban claim responsibility for it. It is almost exactly how Richard did it back in 1979, right?"

I nodded. "During the 1979 hostage crisis, Richard framed Iran for the whole terror campaign after successfully hiring several hundred ex-Moslem generals in Iran, who agreed to take the blame for the embassy hijacking. Those generals also agreed to use some Iranian Revolutionary Guards to pose with the prisoners, so that everyone in America thinks that Iranians were declaring war on the

United States."

"Well, then you would also remember that during the hostage crisis, Baldassarre Bastico was very young, and was very beloved to Richard. Cynthia's stepfather was intimately close to the Italian man, and he personally gave Bastico the order kill those generals before they could tell the American government that Richard had actually paid them to tarnish the image of their own country."

"How long has this Italian-American army officer been working for Richard?" I asked.

"This Italian man has been working for Richard since 1980." Cuthbert responded.

"Isn't he an American citizen?"

"Well, even though Baldassarre Bastico was born in Italy," Cuthbert replied, "he lived in America since his twenties, and learned English properly, before joining the United States Military. He later met Richard and worked in the Intelligence Department where the two men created covert groups of terrorists, and carried out terrorist attacks, and framed other nations for it."

For the next whole week, I spent my time investigating the minor terror attacks that were taking place in Asia, and I tried to find out who was responsible for those attacks.

I needed closure so I asked Joe to forward all the addresses belonging to Clarissa Shetland's associates. The British computer whiz obliged. I made a copy of that list and flew to Canada.

My preliminary investigation led me to an address near the 9th Canadian Division's army base in Ontario. The location itself was mediocre. Six single family houses stood haphazardly over an uncultivated patch of farmland, but it was under one of the houses that I discovered a tunnel. The crudely formed underground passageway led directly into the command center of the army base.

When I entered the command center, I was surprised to find it empty. I could not imagine a Canadian military base would keep the most important area inside the army headquarters unmanned.

"Joe, the missiles are armed!" I shouted, alarmed. "Is there any way to stop the launch?"

"Remotely?" The hacker said dubiously. "It's not possible. Someone in NORAD dropped a jamming signal over your location. I don't have access."

"Okay, here is what I need you to do. I've logged you into the command console. You should have the launch instructions- find out exactly where the missiles are headed."

"I can do that, but how is that going to help?" My tech op questioned.

I sighed. "If we can't prevent the launch, then the least we can do is send an evac order to the target areas. Save some lives."

"Yes, no, it's not good." Joe replied. He sounded on edge. For a moment, he didn't speak.

"What is it?"

"The targets are in New York, Virginia and Washington D.C."

"Narrow down the location, dammit! We need to relay an evacuation order."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Joe said. His voice dropped to a pained whisper. "The missiles that have been armed- they aren't ordinary missiles. Three nuclear warheads are heading towards America."

I felt my heart beginning to race. "What! Canada doesn't have nukes, Joe!" I reminded the hacker.

"Correction," Joe replied. "Canada officially don't have nuclear warheads but they store American ones in their military bases."

"You are positive?"

"Hundreds of U.S.-controlled warheads were stored at Canadian military bases until 1990. Officially, Canada genially returned all of the nuclear-tipped missiles to the Americans, but in reality, they retained some for safekeeping. Someone knew this was one of the military bases that stored the American nukes so they used that tunnel to gain access to the command center and launch a warhead at America."

"Joe, keep tracking the satellite photos over the farmland. I want a positive ID of everyone that entered the house with the tunnel."

"I haven't positively identified all of them yet, but I have clear images. Six men and a woman frequented that tiny hit in the last thirty-six hours. It's anybody's guess who the woman is."

I guessed at once. "Clarissa Shetland."

"Right. She and her henchmen were successful in arming the U.S. nuclear missiles and are launching them over the border."

"How many minutes to the launch?"

"Three minutes." Joe said. "And one more thing. I rechecked the bomb's specifics. Each bomb carries a payload of eight megatons – that's equivalent of eight million tons of TNT explosive."

"Your point?"

“What I’m trying to say is that these warheads are *three hundred* times more destructive than the one that flattened Hiroshima. That means if it hits the target, the bomb will create a hundred percent kill zone within eleven miles radius of the impact.”

I controlled my breathing, refusing to betray my anxiety to the hacker. “On my count of three,” I said calmly, “cut down all communications over northeastern United States and Canada.”

“All communications?” Joe repeated. “Radio and cell towers.”

“Everything.” I affirmed. “It’s the only way to halt the launch.”

“Done.” Joe’s voice rang in my ears a minute later.

“Joe, if you cut all the communications, then why am I hearing your voice in my comms?”

“Because I am talking to you using a personal satellite I had launched into space a while back. But the reason I’ve contacted you is not to chat. The plan didn’t work.”

“What didn’t work?”

“I am receiving a signal right now!” Joe’s voice was rising. “The nuclear warheads are still armed and prepping for the launch.”

“How? I thought you disabled radio communications.”

“It’s my mistake,” Joe spoke hysterically. “The nuclear tipped missiles are fitted with individual launch pad. Even if satellites are down, they could be manually activated. My guess is one of Shetland’s men are there right now. They’ve armed it on site.”

“Where are the weapons now?” I demanded.

“I’ll walk you to the exact location, but you have to hurry. Launch time is two minutes now.”

I pressed my comms closer to ears. “How do I deactivate the missile once I get there?”

Joe cleared his throat. “Each U.S. land-based missile silo has a safety switch. Maintenance workers flip it to safe mode when they are nearby. It prevents the missile from being launched accidentally.”

“Flipping the switch? Got it.”

“Wait! There might be something else. If the missile is about to launch, it would be extremely dangerous to be nearby.”

“Joe, that’s not something I can afford to worry about. If the nukes hit the United States, millions of Americans are going to die, and the Pentagon will think Canada initiated war on them and they will retaliate. White House will give them green light to launch several nukes over Canada. Do you see what kind of Armageddon is about to take place? *Unless* I deactivate the nuclear warheads and prevent the launch.”

“Yeah, I know, that’s why I’m not being able to think straight.” The British programmer stammered. “There should a blue switch on each of the nuclear tipped missiles. It is connected to the beam rider guidance system of the panel.”

“What’s the function?”

“According to the manual I am studying, the system uses the beam pattern of a highly directional radar antenna to connect the missile launching point to the target so if you flip the switch, then the warheads will be forced to reboot, effectively aborting the launch command.”

Twelve hours later, I crossed the U.S.-Canada border by car and arrived at Joe’s safehouse in Vermont.

“When did you become a fan of basements, Joe?” I said casually.

The computer hacker did not look amused. “When you went radio silent, I panicked. For couple of minutes there, I was convinced that I would evaporate in a mushroom cloud.”

“Along with seventeen million Americans.” I said, shaking my head. The impact of the previous day’s actions refused to register in my mind. The day’s activities were oddly blurred, as though it had been a terrible dream that you forgot about as soon as you awoke.

Joe was talking coherently again. “I don’t want to think what would have happened if you were unable to deactivate the nuclear warheads. I rented this underground bunker. It has been cast out of one solid piece of steel-reinforced concrete. I’m still too afraid to venture above ground.” He paused and looked up anxiously. “What’s going to happen the missiles now?”

“NORAD is taking over. I’ve supplied them with a cover story. They have apprehended Clarissa Shetland. You were right about her. Prior to the attack, Shetland infiltrated Ontario’s Simon Nuclear Generating Station as a scientist and obtained data about the nuclear arsenal. She also recruited her assistant from the power station. You captured his photo when we monitored the small house that had the tunnel.”

“Ontario power plant?” Joe whistled softly. “It’s the world’s largest nuclear power plant. Those guys were serious.”

I nodded without speaking.

“Oh, I thought you would find this interesting.” Joe slid his notepad across the table. “Have a look at what I found while holed up in this cozy shelter. Wasn’t this the man you were searching for?”

I studied the screen shot Joe displayed in his iPad. It was Richard. In a series of timed surveillance footages, he could be seen making his way into the Canadian military base. He was flanked by the commander of the base as well as the blonde woman.

I had suspected that Clarissa Shetland was a domestic terrorist but I was surprised to see she had been working directly for Richard.

"When exactly was this taken?" I asked the hacker.

"Five days before you went to Canada. Richard was at the same place the day before. Then I tracked down a private jet that flew him to Alaska."

"Is he still there?"

Joe chewed his lips vigorously. "I couldn't trace his plane's trajectory after that. I don't know which direction he went from there. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. You've done enough." I clapped a hand on Joe's shoulder and left his underground shelter.

My sister was the answer to all of Richard's hate and vengeance he had for me. She was the answer to all his dreams of revenge. Richard thought using the little girl was the only way to make me feel the pain I made him feel by taking his beloved step daughter away from him. So that rich old powerful man went after my mother's family all at once, with all his power and money, with all his goons and henchmen, with all his planning and cunning, he targeted the little girl who was born from the Russian woman. With all the anger of his entire existence, Richard chose her to be his enemy because he thought he finally found my weakness: a family I cared about. My enemy was my sister's enemy. And so, my destiny and her destiny collided in the crossfire of Richard's ambush. Cynthia's father had just stepped up his game of vengeance. And innocents were about to become his victims. I couldn't let him destroy the Russian woman's family and hurt her daughter so I decided to keep a closer watch on her. I failed to keep my own mother safe so I swore not to let any harm befall this woman. I would never let Richard or his psychotic team of torturers kidnap and torture any member of the Russian woman's family- the one place I had considered home.

The best way Richard thought to avenge the betrayal of his stepdaughter was to make the family of his daughter's former lover suffer. He began to send his men to infiltrate the family but I regularly kept tabs on them. They were protected even though they had no idea I existed.

I had never felt more helpless in my entire life.

What should you do when you have learned the truth, and confronted the parties involved, but cannot change the terror that was befalling them? I knew the Russian woman was dying and I also knew that the new wife of her youngest son was slowly poisoning her, but I was unable to stop it from happening.

I could not force the elderly Russian woman to leave her children and move into a hospice, because she was devoted to her children and wanted to live with them and their spouses until her last day.

However, I decided to approach the eldest son who lived in New Jersey, and speak to his wife to find out whether she would be able to take custody of the ailing Russian woman and live with her.

I was also fond of the Russian woman's eldest son, whose age was closer to my own. I particularly shared his enthusiasm for collecting muscle cars and playing difficult sports.

My guess was the Russian woman would be safer away from the young bride if she lived in New Jersey. The youngest son's wife would not be able to poison her if she did not live under the same roof.

When I met the wife of her eldest son, a heavy-set Eastern European woman who had been married to my adopted brother for over a decade, and had two sons of her own, I was surprised to see that she had access to a secure numbered bank account which was based in the West Indies. There was no name associated with it, but I saw her regularly withdrawing and depositing funds there. I used one of my friends in the Treasury Department to track down the source of the money and found out the bank account belonged to a man named Baldassarre Bastico. It was the same Mediterranean born criminal who was paying the Russian woman's youngest daughter-in-law to poison her.

My heart froze in shock when I found out Baldassarre Bastico had already hired the elder son's wife as well! Who would now take care of her in her old age, if all her sons were married to women who were paid by the pimps and mercenaries? These questions provoked such sadness in me that I could not speak for a long time. Again, my eyes were filling with tears but I knew I had to keep trying to convince her. The Eastern-European woman was also behaving like a devoted wife, even though she did not send explicitly graphic pictures of her own body to her husband. I decided to speak to her candidly and asked her why she was receiving money from the Mediterranean criminal.

I began to explain who I was to the Eastern-European daughter-in-law, when she interrupted me sharply and said she would not speak to me, and when I tried to speak to her outside her house, she whipped out a hand-gun and fired at me. If it were not for my years of combat experience, I would have been dead. The Eastern-European woman was a professional sharp-shooter, so it was a miracle that the bullet missed my vital organs as I was able to duck just in time, so that the bullet grazed my shoulder. I was shocked and asked her why she despised me. The oldest son's wife then told me how the Mediterranean mercenary leader had approached her several years ago and showed her evidence that the Russian woman and her oldest son were terrorists who were laundering and delivering nuclear weapons to third-world countries. She also told me how the Mediterranean criminal warned her about me, and said I was also a Russian terrorist who might try to help them. Again, she coldly answered my queries, ignoring my gasps of pain from her bullet wound, and then drove away in her car.

In my injurious condition, I still hopped on a taxi and followed her to see if she visited the Mediterranean criminal again. But instead, I saw that she picked up her two boys and dropped them off at a white-brick three-story house. The boys remained there until the evening, when their mother returned to pick them up. I decided to investigate the place and entered the grounds after their children left.

It was an eerie place. There were numerous small chairs, with belts to strap children into them, and five separate rooms were full of equipment which resembled MRI and scanning machines. There was also an X-Ray machine and other medical equipment in the facility. This was not a daycare center, as I had assumed! It was a clinic, and that too a dangerous kind.

I quickly took some samples from the syringes that looked as though they had been used recently, and again, I rushed to my personal lab and tested the substances. I discovered that the chemicals in those hypodermic needles were a combination of mind-altering drugs, which were proven to inhibit growth, sexual developments among other things. I could not help bursting into tears when I saw how the two little toddlers were suffering at the hands of these mercenaries. And what was worse was that their mother was actively participating in this gross medical practice.

I was overwhelmed by a sense of exhaustion and defeat and could not understand why the Eastern-European daughter-in-law was willingly leaving her sons in such a dangerous clinic. She seemed to me like a caring mother, so the next day, I bandaged the bullet wound on my shoulder, and asked her why she was sending her sons to a dangerous clinic where they were being brainwashed with chemicals.

She answered that the Mediterranean man had approached her and promised he was a well-wisher who would help her escape her dangerous terrorist husband, but in order to do so, he asked her to send her sons to him each day for training, so they would become strong and agree to leave the affectionate father when the right time came. The Eastern-European daughter-in-law also showed me the passports which the Mediterranean pimp had ordered for her and her sons so they could escape into witness protection. I tried to explain to her that her husband was not a terrorist at all. I told her how I knew the Russian woman and all her children from the day they were born, and the oldest son never even tried to hurt a soul in his entire life, but the daughter-in-law did not believe me. I then begged her not to take her sons to the Mediterranean man's clinic anymore, but again, she refused to listen to me and said quite clearly that she did not trust a Russian like me.

I made one final effort and asked her if she would be willing to take in the Russian woman and keep her in her house for a short time, so that the youngest son's wife cannot poison her anymore, but the Eastern-European daughter-in-law refused, saying she would leave this household with her sons very soon, and run away with the Mediterranean man to a safe place, so she did not want to get involved with her mother-in-law. My eyes filled with tears as she reiterated her threats and I felt crestfallen, and left her company.

This family was disintegrating.

I did not know what to do.

My adopted sister was in mortal danger.

My beloved adopted mother was dying in the hands of her own daughter-in-law.

The dearest Russian woman who had sacrificed so much for so many people was slowly dying and I did not have the power to stop it.

I always admired the courage and kindness of the Russian woman, even when she was a young college student in the eighties. I used to see how she worked all night in night shifts and saved all her money, and on the first week of each month, she would rush to the homeless shelter, distribute the money to all the homeless people, and purchase Apple Pie and donuts and donate to the soup kitchen.

But her kindness could not stop these people from trying to harm her. I was melting to tears thinking about how this affectionate and self-sacrificing woman was suffering.

They had targeted her when I was young, and they were still trying to hurt her.

I faced a sudden crash in self-confidence, my body trembled and my light hair stirred upon my head. Tears were welling in my eyes, but they were tears of regret and sorrow.

The world was such a horrible place, with near and dear ones so willing to betray and hurt you, that I felt like giving in to death and leaving these miserable episodes behind and letting go myself to drown in desolation. I was finding no strength and no desire left to sustain myself but I knew I had to love on, at least until the dear old Russian lady, who I considered to be my very own mother, and whose life was now crumbling to pieces due to me being present in her life, and who was being targeted and poisoned by members of her family she loved and trusted. I had often seen her interact with her daughters-in-law, and never before in this world had I seen a mother-in-law show more love or kindness to her son's wife. Yet, she was rewarded for her generosity and sympathy by a callous attack on her life, and no matter how much I pleaded with the new bride, I could not stop her from targeting that family. She was determined to poison and incapacitate the Russian woman, so that the Mediterranean mercenary and his criminals could kidnap the American nun from that residence and sell her to human traffickers. Their orders were the same - to make the Russian woman's daughter suffer so that I may witness it and feel pain and agony at the event. Due to my tears and lamentations, I was overwhelmed with fatigue.

This Russian woman was more beautiful than the full moon, and I had loved not only her character but her soul, because she was always ready to assist the wayfarer, and never turned away a homeless or helpless person from her doorsteps. She was utterly devoted to her father, and would race avenue blocks in order to save money from the bus fare and send it to her aristocratic father who was suddenly inundated with debt. Yet, none of her good deeds were going unpunished. I had hoped that her sons would look after her in old age, but while they were good-hearted simple young men, they suffered the misfortune of marrying women who were paid by the very criminals who had targeted me all my life. And now, I earnestly wished I had never been born and never laid eyes on this beautiful family, for it was because of me that they had spiraled into such a tragic descent. My heart had swelled in fear and despair, as the tears came into my eyes. I did not know what to do or where to go except to melt into the city's strife and sound, like a dying dewdrop in an ocean.

It was a rainy afternoon and I was lounging in a high-end bar, conducting stealth surveillance on two members of the high table, when my pager beeped. I returned the call without delay. It was a message from my friend who had been maintaining security for my family. Liam Fleetwood's security team had intercepted a white male who was exiting from the Russian woman's home. The man was in custody and Liam informed me that he personally conducted the interrogation. Initially, the man was uncooperative but Liam gave him a mild dose of hypnotic drug to lower his defense. He started to talk.

He admitted that someone whose name he didn't know had offered him several hundred million euros of whitened money in exchange of one task: to kidnap the Russian woman's daughter and make porn videos of the young girl. His employer required proof of it in form of pictures and videos as well of photographic evidence of the activities before he wired in their payment. When Liam inquired how he managed to break into the home and take so many pictures without anyone waking up, he admitted to gassing the entire house with a non-lethal chemical that put them into a coma. The former Special Collection Service officer continued the interrogation and finally displayed a polaroid shot of Richard's recent photo and asked him if this was his employer. The prisoner's face went pale and he nodded slowly in response to Liam's question.

When my friend Liam apprised me of the findings, he added that the man in custody had given him three separate addresses of properties he had purchased with the money Cynthia's stepfather had already wired to him; it seems he was getting several million dollars for each batch of photos he supplied of my family's house. My mind which, until then, was dwelling in astral solitude now burned in curiosity for I did not yet want to believe that such sinister plots were in the making. My heart refused to acknowledge that the woman I had considered to be my mother was in such grave danger.

I wanted to discover the truth so I drove to the nearest location on the map. It was a large stone mansion in Fort Covington, near the U.S.-Canada border. I used my gun to blast open the doors and searched the entire property. It was sparsely furnished but I detected a false floor in the kitchen. Using a hand grenade, I blasted a hole and went below to investigate. There was a large glass walled room in the underground section of the house. A small lab was situated next to the glass wall. I fired several rounds at the door but the bullets couldn't penetrate the bullet resistant glass. This place was reinforced with military grade security. I wondered what all this was for. The I saw a man in a lab coat poring over a chemical resistant laboratory work bench. He seemed to be testing something. I walked in noiselessly behind him and held the gun to his head. He yelped and raised his hand.

"Don't shoot!" The lab worker begged me.

"It's up to you," I said harshly. "I don't have time for games. What is this place and what the hell are you doing here?"

"I am only a scientist who was coerced to work for Kristophe."

"Kristophe?" I repeated. "Are you talking about the dark-haired man, square jaw, silver rimmed glasses?"

The worker nodded. "I used to work at a research laboratory that tested neurological chemicals on animals but a huge quantity went missing one day, on my watch. After that, I was fired. The company thought I had stolen it."

"Well, did you?"

"No, I had no idea who did it, until Kristophe offered me a job. Here. When I arrived in this house, he told me I needed to start testing the drugs immediately. He had stolen it from the laboratory."

"Why is Kristophe interested in the drugs?"

"A combination of drugs," the researcher clarified. "Kristophe told me he was going to bring in a girl- a young woman, actually, and he wanted to change her brain a little bit using these drugs."

"Why?"

"Sometimes, these drugs can induce hypnotic control over a subject, and make them do an action contrary to an individual's basic moral principles. Kristophe was adamant that the drugs be used to coerce the young woman into submitting to his sexual fantasies."

"How can a drug do that?" I asked.

"It can turn unwilling subjects into willing agents, although there are significant memory losses as a byproduct. I told Kristophe there would be medical complications and threatened to leave, but he locked me in here, in this basement and said he would kill me if I didn't supply him with the drugs."

"Wait, what did Kristophe tell you? Do you know why he was doing this?"

"I think so," the lab researcher said quietly. "He said it was all because of a video he had to make. He would be paid millions, or even billions of dollars for supplying his boss with a sex tape. I was shocked, obviously, and I told him he didn't need drugs for that, but Kristophe said the girl in question who was the target was not willing to get into any sort of relationships. He had tried to date her, but she had become an Orthodox nun and therefore never reciprocated. Now, his boss said the only way he would get his payment was if he had a proof of his sexual encounter. He needed the drugs to make her amiable."

"That bastard," I whispered angrily.

I knew this was exactly how Richard worked. Cynthia's father tried to do the exact same thing to me and attempted to destroy my identity while holding me captive for three years and brainwashing me into becoming homosexual. Now, he was targeting the only family I ever considered my own.

I told the scientist to leave the mansion while I headed back to my safe house. There was a lot more I needed to find out from the prowler who had broken into my sister's house. Kristophe, or whatever his real name was, would have to give me answers.

There were three bodies lying on the ground. The chair in which Kristophe was chained to was empty. My guards were dead and the criminal had escaped!

I immediately contacted the local authorities and asked them to release an APB among all the nation's police department in order to find this wanted man. They sent out the bulletin soon after but I knew someone with enough skill to knock out three of my elite guards would be able to evade police detection.

I shook in helpless rage. What would I do? My former colleagues at the Agency and the NSA had hired the finest protective agencies to keep the Russian woman and her family safe but there were elements beyond our control. Cynthia's stepfather had hired more men to assault my sister than any of my friends could possibly keep track of.

I needed advice on handling such debilitating situation and reached out to someone I trusted. It was Sam Clark, a former Agency officer who had worked alongside myself in numerous missions in South America. I last saw him six years ago while organizing a hostage rescue mission in Havana.

Clark was brutally honest and reliable. Although he had worked under the supervision of Cynthia's father, he had learned the truth about the old NSA Black Ops director and parted ways after Richard's involvement in the Twin Tower attacks were exposed. I called him and requested an urgent meeting. He indicated the place and time.

One P.M. Under the Coleman Memorial Bridge. I was not surprised. The Memorial Bridge had been built with a series of passageways and compartments in its anchorages, which served as great storage spaces for the wealthy. It was also an ideal place to set command bases for unsanctioned activities.

I knew Sam wanted to meet at the secret vault that was hidden beneath the double swing bridge. For decades, those vaults under the bridge housed private wine cellars and discarded treasures but when I got to the location, I found it to be dark and bare.

My friend from the Agency arrived at the agreed location ten minutes after one o'clock.

His familiar hurried gait cast a long shadow from the other end of the dark enclosure.

"You are late, my friend," I said good naturedly.

Clark laughed. His voice echoed through the cavernous space. "I couldn't believe it was really you. Thought you were dead."

"Couldn't afford to die, not just yet, at least."

My friend adopted a serious tone. "What's up?" He said, his voice laced with concern.

"I need your help," I admitted simply.

"Are you in trouble?"

"Yes, um, no," I corrected myself. "My family is."

"Your family?" Clark repeated.

Using as few words as possible, I filled him in on what had transpired in the past few weeks. I summarized everything Liam had told me about my adopted family and siblings and in particular, how my sister was being targeted by numerous criminals who were promised generous rewards if they could hurt her. My voice choked as I recalled what the captured men had told Liam Fleetwood. I did not know how else to describe my fear to my friend but he seemed to have understood.

Sam Clark paced about the dim and cavernous interior, running his hand over his face. The near-complete darkness of the cavernous interior was dimming my vision but I could still see the deep frown on his face. "I am going to dig into it," he promised. "I will use Agency resources if necessary and get details about those men who have been following your family."

"Thanks, man," I began but my friend brushed off my gratitude.

"Thank me when I bust those perps," Clark said.

We exchanged a brief goodbye and he allowed me to leave first, giving me a fifteen-minute head start to my destination.

Now that I learned of Richard's plans, I knew he wouldn't just hire one team of men to assault my sister. Cynthia's stepfather believed the child was important to me- he would not stop until he made hundreds of sex tape of her with various men and hand the evidence to me. He thought doing this would pain me, would somehow make me the loser of this war game; he had done exactly the same thing when I was involved with Cynthia. He thought the only way to make Cynthia despise me was to drug and brainwash into having sex with male and female prostitutes and videotape those encounters.

More than once, Cynthia confronted me with those videos and images; and time and again, I told her what her father had done. Of course, at that time, I was naïve enough to believe that Richard *was* actually Cynthia's father. Every time he discouraged me from going out with Cynthia, I wanted to think that he was being an overprotective parent who wanted his daughter to be safe. I realized much later what Richard really *was*. He wasn't even her biological father- no, he was a sick man who had killed Cynthia's real father and imprisoned her mother while pretending to be her well-wisher. And when Cynthia got older, the old man became even more obsessed with her and began to destroy any man who got close to her.

Cynthia's step father, who still insisted that she call him dad, was on the move again. I tracked his personal jet to a private landing area near Cranston. I scrambled all my saved documents to find something relevant in Rhode Island but no matter how much I searched- I could come up with no firm reason that would compel Richard to pay a visit to the remote area. Hours later, I received a media alert. An elderly man had been shot in the area. Upon reading the article, I saw that he was none other than a son of the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

I did not know why the son of a dead Soviet premier was targeted by Richard, but he was likely trying to kill any notable Russian national who lived in the United States.

I had no doubt that Richard was instrumental in executing the old man- but why did he ever choose to kill the biological son of the Soviet Premier who assumed power after Stalin died? I racked my brains until I could think of only one person who could have told him that information. It was my stepfather who was languishing for life in a British jail for murdering my mother.

I had to speak to him to find out if he had been contacted by Richard, but my heart would not bear to see his face. Even after these long years, my eyes burned with pain every time I pictured my mother's blood-soaked body and the bullet that tore through it. It was his fault. The drunken criminal who had systematically abused her until he inadvertently caused her to die. My dear mother was no more because of the wretched man. No, I didn't want to visit him in prison at all. Instead, I hired a barrister in London and mailed him a list of question. The lawyer got back to me the next day. He confirmed that Richard had indeed paid a visit to the London jail. My stepfather admitted that he was not my real father and that after my mother married the Politburo member, the Soviet communist party leader refused to officiate the marriage certificate and she was unhappy for being a source of a scandal for giving birth to a boy without having an official husband, so the guard swiftly married her to claim paternity of the child in order to spare her the embarrassment. The child was me. Richard must have been surprised to find this piece of information about my background. It was one of the things I told no one

in this world. I never thought it was relevant who my real father was. I was my mother's son because it was she who had suffered most on my account. My birth nearly caused her death. I could not forgive myself.

When Cynthia and I got together as a couple, I became her step father's latest target. But unlike most men in Cynthia's life, I was too stubborn to let her go. I loved her and I wasn't prepared to let Richard come in between. Instead of dumping Cynthia at his behest, I confronted her and told her all about Richard's manipulations. She believed me and agreed to leave the controlling old man and move in with me. This made Richard more angry than anything else in the world. On one occasion, he publicly berated me and warned me not to get comfortable with his daughter. Richard subsequently began framing me for murders he himself committed. He sent hundreds of assassins to kill me. When all failed, he tracked down the only family who mattered to me: the Russian woman who I had crossed paths with after arriving in America as a teenager. Richard figured out the family was my weakness, and now he was targeting them.

It had been early January of 2011 when I was alerted of the travel plans of the Russian woman who I had come to see as my own mother. The security team Liam Fleetwood had employed to protect her family notified reported that they were travelling to her home land. I thought little of the trip but instructed the guards to accompany them discreetly to Russia. There were no security complications in the winter trip and the family seemed delighted to be reunited with aunts and cousins.

When the brief trip was over, the former officer at the Special Collection Service gave me an update about the family. His team noticed that the Russian woman's daughter was enamored by her mother's sisters. The aunts took the young girl everywhere. They visited the majestic cathedrals of Novgorod, Kizhi, Kronstadt and Saint Petersburg. It must have been a fulfilling trip because once the family returned to America, I was interested to know that my sister had adopted a new way of life. Liam's security team informed him that they had witnessed the teenager taking vows of abstinence and obedience in the presence of her maternal aunts. The young girl was besotted with her aunts and chose to follow their calling and promised to obey the abbess, the spiritual mother of the church. Like her mother's cousin who was an Orthodox monastic, my sister decided to adopt an ascetic lifestyle and live her life in prayer and contemplation after spending two weeks at a local cathedral and taking care of the monastery houseplants and birdwatching.

Would this be the ultimate lifestyle of my little sister, the girl I witnessed grow up and shine? When I expressed astonishment at her choice, Liam assured me that the teen was enamored by her family's history. Her grandfather, the Russian woman's father, had been a wealthy Communist era leader in the former Soviet Union. He converted most of his vast fortune into building estates, including building the most glamorous convent in Vologda Oblast of Russia. When the girl learned that her grandfather owned the magnificent convent, she desired to be a part of the Orthodox order right away. But the abbess of the convent told her in order to be a nun in the Orthodox church, she needed to spend two years as a novice before being permitted to take her first vow.

I must admit, part of me wished she would marry a young man around her own age and live a productive and happy life. It worried me that a monastic life might make her susceptible to boredom and despair. But aside from mild concerns, I did not give it much thought at that time. Is it not what teenagers do at this age? Explore different modes of living?

It was several years later that I regretted my sister's decision more and more. She was still young but staunchly devoted to her vows that she took as a teenager while visiting Russia. She passed high school with honors, surpassing her peers in almost all fields of study. However, boyfriends and sweethearts were largely absent from her life. She snubbed all romantic advances from her male peers, skipped her prom and pursued higher education diligently, going on to secure a position in one of the nation's prestigious universities. I was inwardly proud of my sister's achievement. She excelled in undergraduate education and was an all A student at a local Ivy League institution. However, she was stubbornly adhering to her monastic vows and refused to take boyfriends, spending her free time volunteering at the local churches and distributing food and winter clothing at the community kitchen in Manhattan's old Presbyterian church.

Six weeks after I had spoken to my friend from the Agency, he called me from a secure line and wanted to meet. I was in St. Lawrence Island, a tiny area surrounded by the Bering Sea. I was meeting an old friend from Russia, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Puzanov, a former KGB agent who was framed for the murder of several senior comrades. I became acquainted with Vyacheslav when the colonel at my training Camp sent me to the prison complex in the Nertchinsk district: my mission was to eliminate the KGB agent, who the Colonel insisted was a highly dangerous criminal who had betrayed the Soviet Union. At that time, I was a naïve teenager and found no reason to doubt the Colonel's words and set forth on my mission.

I was smuggled into the vast prison under a pseudonym and had to spend four days searching for the target. When I finally found Vyacheslav Puzanov, I noticed that he was a frail man, severely ill from tuberculosis. He somehow knew I was sent by the Colonel and told me about the real purpose of my Camp. He enlightened on the illegitimacy of the Sector I worked for and told me that the Colonel

had been disavowed by the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* years ago and was a rogue agent waging a personal war using his former credentials.

What Vyacheslav told me made sense so I decided to check the facts myself and found out that I had been indeed misled and the recruits in the colonel's Camp were all being led astray. They served him faithfully believing that the Colonel was representing a secret branch of the KGB.

After I learned the truth, I decided to free Vyacheslav Puzanov from prison and hid him in a safe location for a little over two years. Before I left for the United States, I promised to send him money so that he could maintain his hiding location without getting caught by the Colonel. Vyacheslav and I had kept in touch since then and he had since rejoined the intelligence service with a clean record and was instrumental in bringing down the rogue colonel who had deceived and stolen the prime from so many Russian youths.

My friend was currently an independent consultant for the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and was meeting with me to discuss the personal crisis I had confided in him months earlier. It was about the persistent attack on my family. The Russian woman and her children were in danger. Twice, her daughter was nearly abducted.

The security patrols I had appointed to protect them were getting overwhelmed by the sheer volume of attacks on each member of the only people I considered my own family. I knew there was only one way to halt further attacks on my family: finding the perpetrators- not the hired thugs who were sent to kidnap or kill but their benefactor. Two of my former colleagues from the CIA promised to look into the attempted kidnaping case but could not trace the source. I was frustrated by the lack of progress and reached out to my old friend who worked at the Russian *Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti* and had access to remote satellites. I begged him to help me protect my family. Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Puzanov was aghast to hear how the little girl was being targeted by the criminals and he vowed to do everything in his power to apprehend every last person responsible for the kidnapping attempt.

Vyacheslav was admiring the interior of the Heat and Power generator of the giant building. "How are they powering their plant?" He glanced around the brightly-lit interior. "Wouldn't the electric grid sense a surge in this area?"

"No, Slava," I answered, using the Russian diminutive of his name. "Not if they used an independent nuclear-powered plant."

"There is one in the heart of this island?" Vyacheslav asked, not believing such thing could exist in such an obscure island.

"After the Y2K Scare, local government decided to build a generator in case power ran short around here." I told him.

"America is full of interesting things, no?" The Russian man was saying but my attention was diverted to the automatic entrance that was sliding open.

"We have company, Slava," I informed my Russian friend and quickly introduced him to the two men who were making their way over.

Sam Clark took several long strides offered his hand to each one of us. I noticed both men had come armed. Sam's handgun was stashed in the waist band of his athletic shorts. The former Agency officer looked suspiciously at Vyacheslav but I waved away his concerns.

"Slava is an old friend," I told the two CIA officers who had just arrived. "I trust him with my life, so anything you were going to discuss with me, you can tell him."

The newcomers nodded quickly and we made our way to the computers that were recessed to the far end of the hall.

"By the way, this is Bruce Moore, my protégé at the Agency," Sam gestured at the younger man who had accompanied him to this meeting. "Bruce did most of the research that I am about to enlighten you about. He did the actual legwork- of following the would-be-kidnappers, the hired assassins and the paid saboteurs who have been stalking your family for some time now."

I could feel my heart beat faster. "Assassins? Kidnappers? Why are such dangerous people after my family? They are nobody- civilians who have nothing to do with State secrets or my covert ops."

Sam Clark looked perplexed. "About that, how often do you meet them? This adopted family of yours."

I wanted to laugh in relief. "Zero. I've never made contact with them," I replied simply. "I knew having loved ones associated with me would put their lives in danger so I never contacted that family or even spoke to them. The reason they are so important to me is only because of the mother. The Russian woman who I first saw in the eighties looked exactly like my own mother and her son – who I now know was her adopted son- was around my age."

"But you kept track of them," the man called Bruce interrupted.

I looked at Sam's protégé closely. Bruce did not look like a typical field operative. He had approximately five ear piercings, perched a thick rectangular glass on the edge of his nose and talked in short burst.

"I kept tabs- yes- only because it reminded me of home. But I never actually made contact. The family doesn't know I exist."

"Woah, that is *not* what I expected!" Bruce let out a soft whistle.

I frowned, unable to grasp the gist of his exasperation.

“That family is facing a hotter hell than devil himself- pretty dramatic for some civilian who never even saw you.”

I closed my eyes to shut the worry that threatened to envelope my thought process. “How bad is it, Bruce? You did reconnaissance for several months so tell me.”

Bruce removed a thick folder from his side bag and placed the papers on the metal table. “I compiled a brief profile for each of the suspects that we believe have been following and targeting your family for some time now. From what I gathered- based on the wiretapping and interception of their emails- they may have been tracking your family for years.”

“Years?” I repeated, not wanting to believe that the woman I had considered to be a mother figure had been a target to dangerous criminals for such a long time. “Who are those men who are after them?”

“I tracked four or five of them- they fall under same old categories. Freelance mercenaries, former government agent including a Mossad operative, one is a former criminal informant for the Europol, and there is a seven-star gang leader based in Mumbai.”

Sam Clark nodded thoughtfully. “You should probably know that the latest attempt on your family was a rather large operation. We intercepted five men- all former Shin Bet agents- who were attempting to kidnap the Russian woman *and* her daughter; that too, in broad daylight.”

“I keep forgetting she had a daughter. Didn’t the woman have several sons?”

“Five boys.”

“Are there hit on the boys as well?” I wanted to know.

Bruce shook his head, worriedly. “It is unusual but they were not targeted in any way, we are positive about that. Initially, we believed the daughter was the main target but after nabbing those thugs who tried to grab mother and daughter, we discovered an interesting character; the main bad guy who was pulling the strings.”

“Who is he?”

“Yakov Raikhverger.” Bruce stated, as he tossed another file on the table. “As you can tell from his uniform’s insignia, Raikhverger served in a black ops unit of the intelligence department of the Israeli Defense Force.”

“He is Israeli?”

“Not entirely. His father was a Russian Jew but he was born in Haifa to an Israeli mother and was raised mostly in Tel Aviv. Graduated with honors from Tel Aviv University before being recruited by Israeli intelligence. Currently Raikhverger is believed to have formed his own private off the book unit in the IDF’s intelligence corps. A skilled agent- reportedly has a hundred percent success rate and carried out numerous kill missions for the undercover counterterrorism division. This guy hired the grab team to abduct your family, but we were lucky to be there when we were, because the men we captured were more than willing to talk.”

Vyacheslav Puzanov lifted the waxed paper and blinked in alarm. “I know this face,” he exclaimed. “I saw it somewhere.”

“Where, Slava?” I asked quickly.

“Of course,” my Russian friend was murmuring, as though to himself. “It *is* Raikhverger.”

“I’m afraid the name means nothing to me,” I admitted a little impatiently.

“He has been on the SVR’s most wanted list.”

Sam Clark scowled fiercely. “Russia’s external intelligence agency is after him?” He said. “For what?”

“For nearly fifty separate charges including armed burglary, racketeering, sex trafficking, forced labor conspiracy and other felony charges of stealing precious art crafts from our national museums and massive money launderings,” Vyacheslav Puzanov informed us. “This man fled the Federation after *Sluzhba vneshney razvedki* issued a warrant for his arrest. Since then, we couldn’t track him down.”

Bruce Moore squinted his eyes. “I’m surprised,” the Agency officer remarked. “SVR conducts anti-terrorist cooperation and intelligence-sharing arrangements with foreign intelligence agencies on a regular basis. If they couldn’t find Yakov Raikhverger, he must be pretty skilled at hiding.”

I glanced at Bruce. “What did you find out about this fugitive? From his guards, I mean?”

“They seemed clear on their objective. The instructions were to kidnap the girl and her mom. Her mom was the insurance, apparently, but the main task was to shuttle the kid in a sex ring and make several hundred porn videos. Their boss gave them a simple order. If the girl refused to cooperate in the videos, her mother would be tortured in front of her. One of the men we captured gave specifics- he was a guard and admitted that he and his colleagues were supposed to star in those sex videos. Apparently, Raikhverger ordered them to cut off the mother’s fingers one at a time, until her daughter cooperated and agreed to star in the sex tapes.”

“Why would someone go through all this trouble to send an American college girl into a sex ring?” Sam Clark inquired.

“Yeah, we thought so too. The objective was bizarre. Yet, the rogue Mossad operatives insisted that a lot of money was at stake, and if they successfully supplied the videos, then they would receive large sum of money per scene.”

I tried to clear my thoughts and turned to Bruce. “How did you find out all the details?”

“We intercepted a secure phone conversation between this Mossad guy and another unknown man- presumably the one who hired him- that he would be compensated in billions of Israeli shekels if he managed to make sex videos of your sister and upload it to the internet.”

“What?” Nothing the man said made any sense to me.

“I brought the recording along, if you want to hear for yourself.”

“Did the Raikhverger agree to the task?”

“He sounded rather enthusiastic. Listen to this; here, he is saying ‘don’t worry, I’ll make so many different kinds of porn videos that every freckled youngster in the world will have a copy of the little girl’s sex tape downloaded on their laptop.’ As per the agreement, he did get a generous installment and was able to proceed with his porn mission.”

“How are you so sure about this man? How long had you kept him under surveillance?”

“Six months. We noticed that Yakov Raikhverger manages most of his affairs via his trusted bodyguards. My team followed three of them- round the clock,” Sam informed me.

His protégé nodded. “The man we intercepted- the one who was attempting to kidnap the Russian woman- he was hired as a freelancer by Raikhverger. He didn’t know the details of Raikhverger’s plans but said his orders were to kidnap the mother and keep her in a secure location, so the daughter would be obliged to cooperate.”

“So, the girl and mom were not to be kept in captivity?” I pressed, still confused about their investigation results.

“Not in the same place. We know this much: the young girl was scheduled to be abducted around the same time but her destination was Avivim.”

“What or where is Avivim?” I asked.

“It is a moshav in the far north of Israel, located less than one kilometer from the Lebanese border. Raikhverger owns two properties there so we went to investigate. There was a partially hidden estate that was being manned by sixteen security guards.”

“Did you get any intel from the guards?”

“They were terrified of Raikhverger but one of the guards cracked under interrogation and told us that he and his peers were ordered to stand by for the target. I’m guessing we all know who the target was? Your sister.”

“Sixteen men to guard her? What the hell?”

“They apparently had a job,” Bruce grimaced before speaking. “Each was instructed to have sex with her- they were told she would be a willing participant if they played live feed of her mother who was scheduled to be abducted along with her. If the girl still didn’t cooperate, her mother’s fingers or other body parts would be sliced until she agreed to make the sex tapes.”

“Son of a b***h!” Sam Clark whispered furiously.

His protégé bowed his head before speaking. “The Russian-Israeli undercover agent looked like a law-abiding citizen. His file was pretty neat. Lots of awards. The guy is not a criminal.”

“Not a criminal?” Sam Clark roared. “What kind of dirty bastard hires his bodyguards to rape a little girl? Worst species of pigs.”

Bruce pursed his lips. “Yakov Raikhverger was heavily in debt. He profile did not match that of a professional criminal but he had contacts in the underground. And Vyacheslav was right about him being wanted by the SVR. Recently, Raikhverger reportedly laundered money for an organized criminal group in Russia. He lost their money, either intentionally or by accident, and fell into severe debt. I believe he did the whole kidnapping of the girl for the money. His records don’t show any kidnapping, rape or murder in his past.”

Sam cleared his throat and looked at me. “There is one thing you needed to know, John,” he told me. “We didn’t want to mention this earlier but there was something we found out while investigating the money trail. The men who were hired to kidnap and rape your sister were all paid by a single organization.”

“Which organization is that?” I demanded. “We can shut it down, right?”

“It is complicated. It seems that our old employer from the NSA, your girlfriend’s daddy- hired a separate network, a secure group that hires men, to do various illegal activities.”

“Richard is behind this?” I repeated.

“We are positive,” Bruce echoed. “We don’t know what his motive was, but there is a possibility that he believed you are close to that family; it was your vulnerable spot.”

I felt dizzy with frustration. The world in which I lived was surreal. My heart was broken into so many pieces that I could no longer salvage the discarded shards that had scattered across continents.

I had nobody, I loved no one, hated no one. I was only my mother's son, and everyone I ever loved betrayed me, and those who didn't turn their backs on me got hurt or was killed. I had no home. No country. No nationality. No father and no identity. The only person in this world who had loved me was my dear mother, and with her death, a part of my young heart died forever.

When I finally moved to America and saw a Russian woman who looked nearly identical to my mother, my heart shuddered in nostalgia, as though my mother's memories were being revived. In my mind, I imagined that woman was my mother- they had such resemblance that it was impossible not to think so. Her son was nearly my age- of course, I discovered years later, that the boy I saw with her was not her biological child but rather an adopted one.

Now, at this stage of my life, when I am reeling from numerous injuries and ill health, I am astounded that life would have more bitter pills in store for me. The adopted family who I considered my very own was under attack from the most vile enemies and there was little I could do to ward off those assassins and kidnappers who had the audacity to kidnap and torture the elderly Russian woman who looked like my dear mother. Her children were being targeted by the thugs who had been hired to abuse and torture them. Somehow, the scores of enemies I made in the past decades thought the best way to hurt me was through my family and so the unsuspecting civilians in this household became the target of these international hitmen.

Sam was addressing me again. "There is another person of interest in the family."

"Who?" I said absently.

"A young woman. She lives intermittently in your mother's house."

"Friend or relative?" I asked.

"She is a niece, I believe. But the two girls are very close."

Sam's protégé stepped forward to speak. "While your sister goes to an Ivy League institution in New York City, her slightly older cousin is set to graduate with honors from West Point."

"The military academy?" I wanted to clarify.

"The very same. We intercepted several assassins and studied their communication channels. There is no doubt that there is a shoot-to-kill order out there."

"The assailants are looking to kill or kidnap?"

"Unlike your sister, they are not interested in abducting the West Point girl. They want her dead."

I looked quizzically at Sam. "How can you be certain?"

"Following our tip, the Criminal Investigations Unit of the NJ police arrested a sixty-two-year-old man last month. He was a one-man death squad sent to kill the cousin."

"What was the cousin doing in New Jersey if she studies at West Point?" The Russian intelligence officer wondered.

Bruce Moore answered unhesitatingly. "Good question. His sister's older cousin was in NJ to visit an ailing uncle who was hospitalized after suffering from a heart attack. She was there alone when we noticed an unidentified man posing as the hospital security guard minutes before she entered the lobby. He then followed her to the elevator and waited until she exited, but luckily one of our agents were present and we intercepted the killer moments before he pounced. We recovered a hypodermic syringe containing a lethal dose of midazolam in his hand. He was seconds away from injecting the solution into the young woman."

"Are you certain it was *poison* in the needle?" I asked.

Sam nodded. "An associate professor of anesthesiology and surgery at that hospital confirmed it," he replied. "The solution contained vecuronium bromide, a chemical used clinically in anesthesia to paralyze the muscles, but in this case, the dose was fatal. Of course, we interrogated the assassin and handed the man over to the NJPD, but our tech guy traced the money he had received for the kill job."

"Who paid him to kill the cousin?" I asked. "Richard?"

"That is interesting, but no, we are positive it wasn't Richard who was after her. The one-man death squad was sent by a man named Roumen Jeliakov. He is a Bulgarian national but traveled to the United States fifteen times in the past three years. Has a packed criminal record."

My comrades were murmuring, speaking in low tones and discussing defensive strategies but I was hardly listening.

"The mother was targeted- I can't believe this," Vyacheslav was saying. "Why couldn't they leave the Russian woman alone?"

"They needed the leverage, I think," Bruce explained. "The girl had taken some sort of vow at a Russian Orthodox church and refused to be promiscuous. Yakov Raikhverger and his men somehow knew that, so they planned to kidnap the mom in order to cajole her into acting in their porn videos."

"Abhorring!" Vyacheslav Puzanov roared, thumping the table. "I should hang them all right away."

“Easy, fellow,” Bruce said. “Wait till you find out about the other four men who were behind the sporadic attacks on this family. Some are professional criminals. The Raikhverger guy is not an outlaw- he actually works for a legitimate intelligence agency now. But the other man we intercepted is not so harmless.”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“This man,” Bruce said, tossing an open folder over the metal desk. A mugshot was stapled over the pages. It was the face of a middle-aged man, with brooding eyes set under dark, bushy eyebrows and a glittering bald head. “His name, or the alias he most often used, is Roumen Jeliaskov.”

I squinted. “Bulgarian?”

“He was born in Bulgaria, from a Romanian mother and Bulgarian father. Father was mostly absent from his life, so his mother raised him until she died, presumably from drug related offenses. Jeliaskov was sent to a Romanian catholic orphanage where he was raised by nuns and priests.”

I was still studying the mugshot and interrupted Bruce. “Do you have an older picture? I needed to know what he looked- perhaps a decade earlier?”

My friend Sam narrowed his eyes. “You think you might know him.”

“Not just know, Sam, but I can swear I’ve seen him- and more than once.”

“Where?”

“The last time I saw him- it was in a hospital. At the ICU of *Postnov Yuriy Gennad'yevich* Medical Center. He was sent there to kill me, and had murdered two of the medical staff in the corridor. That was when I dragged myself off the gurney and wore a white coat to disguise myself as a doctor and fled the hospital before he could carry out his mission.”

“How were you sure he was at the hospital to kill you?” Bruce inquired.

“I saw him with Richard so many times. He is a reliable assassin. Richard have been using his service since 1992.”

“They know each other for that long?”

I nodded. “That is how much Richard trusted him. When I was sent to Kremlin, Richard told me that someone was trying to detonate an explosive under the Spasskaya Tower and I needed to find it before anyone got hurt. I immediately set about the task and was scouring the area when dozens of FSB agents surrounded me. They said they had found tons of demolition material in my hotel room- which was absurd because until then, I haven’t even been to my hotel. But that was when I realized I was being framed. Richard sent me to Russia in order to frame me for the bombing of Kremlin and he naturally sent his most trusted killer to do the job. The Russian intelligence bureau believed I was trying to blow up the Kremlin. Needless to say, I struggled to get away and prove my innocence and find out who really planted the explosives, and in that scuffle, I got injured and was hospitalized. And this Bulgarian assassin showed up in the hospital to finish me off. If it wasn’t for Slava, I would have ended up dead or worse, in a Siberian ice prison for twenty years.”

Bruce listened intently before speaking. “You mentioned seeing Roumen Jeliaskov twice. When was the other sighting?”

“In Venice. Eight years ago. Jeliaskov was on a roof top with a sniper rifle. His first shot missed me and hit a pedestrian instead. I used my thermal binoculars and caught a rough glimpse of Jeliaskov, but his second bullet partially shattered my collarbone. I was lucky to survive.”

“At least, someone here can confirm Jeliaskov’s identity,” Sam commented. “What else did you find out about his background, Bruce?”

“Apparently, his childhood was influenced by his caretakers to some degree because in his late teens, he joined the Basilican Mafia, and gained the trust of the Italian mob boss. According to a source in Europol, Jeliaskov was believed to be the mafia’s best hitman, with over fifteen hundred confirmed kills.”

“He’s an assassin then?”

“Roumen Jeliaskov *was* an assassin,” Bruce clarified. “It is unclear what his current occupation is, but we traced his newly earned money.”

Sam interrupted. “Could you tell us about the source of his cash?”

“How exactly are they receiving these payments?” I added. “Hundreds of millions of dollars should have been flagged by Interpol or the IRS, in the least? That is how I was able to track the source last time, when Richard placed a hit on me on the open market.”

“He’s evolved since,” Bruce observed. “Most of their payment appears to be coming in the form of uncut diamonds and stolen artworks and paintings. This Bulgarian killer has been wiring hundreds of millions of euros to the Vatican City and has been sighted meeting with several cardinals. A source in the Vatican claimed that Jeliaskov is a devout Catholic who has expressed a strong desire to become the new pope.”

“The killer wants to be the Pope?”

“We intercepted a communiqué from Richard’s firm- it seems that in addition to monetary gifts in billions, the Bulgarian assassin was promised huge support with respect to his lifelong ambition of becoming the next Pope.” As Bruce spoke, he exuded energy and data, but his voice faltered when he described the telephone conversations of the Bulgarian suspect.

“How will Richard ensure Jeliaskov would be selected for the role of papacy?”

“We are not entirely sure what his plans are but Roumen Jeliaskov has been giving hundreds of million in donation to His Holiness’s support fund. In addition to buying support with money, Jeliaskov has been taking lessons on Christ at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Rome.”

“He is a man of god, then?” Vyacheslav Puzanov commented mournfully. “I would not expect a holy person to hire groups of men to torture and assault a young innocent girl?”

“I understand he planned to carry out drastic measures, but from all the emails and phone conversations we intercepted, it doesn’t seem like he planned to execute the girl. One of the other men Richard’s firm hired planned to have her raped and shot. I would say he may have been a killer but perhaps changed his ways. He has spent a lot of time in the company of Holy See’s finest for the past three years and this may have caused his thirst of violence to abate.”

“What do we know about his associates?”

“Like I said, his lines of communication are very secure so we are unable to hear everything he says. But we noticed he spent a lot of time in a château south of France. A civilian companion shared the accommodation with him but we are yet to ascertain the nature of their relationship.”

“I don’t care about his personal life, Bruce,” I said. “All I know is that this Bulgarian assassin was and is a trusted associate of Richard and that worries me. I need to know what that killer is up to.”

Sam cleared his throat. “John, do you remember Justin Thompson?”

“The former FBI special agent?” I elaborated. “Yes, how can I forget? We ran several joint operations with the Bureau; that was before you became my lifesaver and used the Agency’s data cache to supplement my intel. But he was old. Didn’t he retire ten years ago?”

“Special Agent Thompson retired at the age of sixty-seven. But he is still strong as a horse and sharp as hell.” Sam Clark thinned his lips before continuing. “Well, I probably should have told you earlier, but I actually hired the man to lead the security detail on your mother’s family.”

Thompson was an old friend whom I trusted with my life. I had known him since my early days at the Agency and on more than one occasion, he had helped me prove my innocence when I was miserably framed for several attacks on U.S. soil. I knew he was a reliable FBI agent but my mind was trying to process the information about my family’s security status.

I looked beseechingly at my friend. “Sam, I don’t get this- you, Liam and Justin. Why did you suddenly decide to open up a secret service style protective detail around my family? I mean, don’t get me wrong, buddy, I appreciate you guys going behind my back and trying to protect me and my family but I had no idea they were in danger in the first place. To be honest, I didn’t even keep contact with them for the better part of this decade.”

“We did,” Sam said tightly. “We kept close watch on them, because we knew you had dangerous and powerful enemies. We did what any friend would have done. Several years ago, when the Russian woman’s family fell under attack, I found no one better than Thompson to entrust their safety with. He vowed to protect the only family you had left in this world, so I rested at night in peace knowing they would be safe.”

“And when exactly did you learn about the hired thugs; the ones who were planning to abduct the young kids?”

Sam Clark was speaking again. “Well, Thompson reached out to me several months back to report on some anomalies that were taking place in your family’s house.”

“What sort of anomalies?” I said, searching my friend’s face. Although Sam was a tall man, his seventh decade had caused his shoulders to drop slightly and deep lines accentuated his large open forehead.

“There had been cases of severe food poisoning and unexplained illness in your family,” Sam informed me quietly. “Your mother suffered two mild heart attacks. The dad was seen limping to work. The children, who are technically adults, were also suffering from various complications as well. Thompson told me he was worried and feared that the family may have become victims of mass poisoning. So, they mobilized a Hazmat team to search the premises and inspect all food and beverages in their house. You want to guess what your security men found?”

“How bad was it?” I said tightly.

“Thompson’s team took samples from their food and other supplements. It seemed that almost all the items were laced with some sort of herbs and other chemicals. It took weeks of testing to find out what the real culprit was but the medical laboratory confirmed that the family was being systematically poisoned by a third party. People in that household therefore suffered repeatedly from unexplained ailments and diseases. When your mother suffered a mild heart attack and had to be taken to surgery, Thompson became more vigilant in his search so his team inspected everything that came in through the mail. Every package was tested.”

“What kind of package do they order anyway?” I wanted to know.

“All sorts of herbal medicines, supplements and nutrition packs, the usual most American families purchase. Unfortunately, everything they purchased *online* were toxic, although it was via verifiable sources like Amazon and other renowned retailers. Some of the capsules contained enough poison to kill, even if taken intermittently.”

“Why would someone want to poison my entire family? What’s their agenda?”

“I can’t be sure, neither was Thompson, but the man decided to increase surveillance and began to inspect all incoming mail and packages. To nobody’s surprise, the items that came via USPS were heavily contaminated. I don’t know if your mother found out about the poisoning or somehow suspected that her family has been getting suspiciously ill, but they began to venture to health food stores physically to purchase their supplements.”

“That was a smart move,” I sighed in relief. “At least the store-bought items would have been safe to consume.”

“I’m afraid that wasn’t the case entirely,” Sam began.

“What do you mean?”

“The Russian woman- your mother as you call her- drove to a nearby vitamin shop and purchased multiple supplements like turmeric powder, aged garlic capsules, olive leaf extract and other harmless herbs for natural remedy of heart health. We thought everything was normal with that purchase until our lab experts took samples of the herbs and found similar toxicity level in those as well.”

“How?” I asked the two CIA officers. “Who could have tampered with hundreds of random store items?”

“The security team were just as bewildered until they analyzed the CCTV footage of the vitamin shop. Five plainclothes men entered the store, around fifty minutes before your family visited the health food store and they were caught on camera spiking hundreds of bottles and replacing the rest with their own supplies.”

“The store owner let them tamper with the goods?”

“They seemed to have been paid as well. Or at least had an understanding.”

“I am still confused about one thing- how did those five poison men know my mother would be going to the particular vitamin store?”

“That’s a good question. They kept tabs on the car’s GPS and arrived at the destination before the woman. It was how they were staying ahead of them and poisoning all the herbs.”

“Why didn’t Thompson capture the culprits?”

“He did,” Sam reiterated. “How else do you think we found out all the details about their poisoning mission?”

“Well?” I said, hungry for more information.

“Three of the men your security detail picked up were eager to cooperate. They were freelance criminals who were ordered to replace specific supplements in certain stores. They did not know why they had to poison the bottles of medicines.”

“Who hired them?”

“Again, none of them seemed to have any idea. They were hired via a secure phone line.”

“But they must have been paid for their service,” I insisted. “Didn’t Thompson trace their wire transactions?”

“Whoever this group or person was who wanted to poison your entire family was being very smart about it, John. They covered their tracks so well that even after using Agency resources, I could not identify their employer. The men claimed they were paid in cash- the money was air-dropped at random locations prior to each stint. Sometimes, their job consisted of entering a health food store and replacing fifty or hundred bottles with poisonous material and other times, they had to intercept the mailman and replace the supplements that came through the online orders. Either way, the poor family was totally stumped and in grave danger. It is a miracle that they are still alive.”

“I don’t understand- why would they order dozens of supplements instead of going to the physician for a proper diagnosis? Was there any particular reason for that?”

“I wouldn’t call the supplements medicines; they were more like healthy food items such as raspberry leaf powder, blueberry extra, liver cleanse herbs, lemon balm powder, echinacea leaves or oregano or olive oil extracts. Harmless items but are good for the overall health and immune system.”

“How ill did the family members get after consuming the contaminated supplements?”

“Aside from the mother’s heart attack, the most vulnerable victim had been the Russian woman’s brother. I suppose you would consider him to be your uncle of sorts.”

“What happened to him?”

“There has been a death- I mean to say he died a month ago- from a series of heart attack.”

“But why? How?” I demanded. “I thought it was only this Russian woman whose medical supplies were contaminated.”

“Her brother who lived in New Jersey had been suffering from various health complications and she mailed several bottles of her own heart supplements. Clearly, those were severely spiked with certain chemical agents that amplified heart disease.”

“What sort of chemicals were those?”

“Almost all the supplements were full of antifibrinolytic drugs, the kind which promote blood clotting. Our lab identified significant amounts of aprotinin, tranexamic acid and epsilon-aminocaproic acid in the herbal supplements the uncle had taken. As a result, he suffered immediate heart attack and had to be taken to surgery. Unfortunately, following the open-heart surgery, your uncle contracted sepsis, causing life- threatening multi-organ failure and died in the ICU. It was a devastating blow for the entire family. They have no idea of course that he was poisoned but we recovered samples of the supplements he had been taking and the results are conclusive.”

“Those murderers!” Vyacheslav said sharply.

Bruce rubbed his palms purposefully. “You are not wrong there,” he told the Russian spy. “The thugs Richard had hired had graduated into cold-blooded murder. We studied the samples of all their store-bought health food supplements and discovered that nearly all has toxic level of arsenic. The unfortunate victims to this poisoning stunt have been several people in your family’s immediate household. Like we mentioned earlier, the mother is a heart patient now. But what surprised us even more was the medical prognosis of the older girl- the cousin who lives there.”

“What’s up with her?”

“She suffered renal failure and doctors are not even sure dialysis will be enough at this stage.”

“Her kidneys failed?” I repeated, unsure of how this was related to the other events.

“According to the medical records we accessed,” Bruce confirmed. “Your friend Thompson was keeping us updated. He found out that the cousin had consumed several of the health food supplements that were poisoned and invariably damaged her internal organs permanently. He thinks the girl may be terminally ill.”

Vyacheslav Puzanov exhaled noisily. “How is it possible that veteran CIA officers like yourselves are not being able to identify the perpetrators?”

“Vyacheslav, it isn’t that easy,” Sam said. “The perps have covered their tracks very well, but we are also being vigilant about protecting the family from further harm. For the moment, we are guessing that one or more of the hired men who had tried to kidnap the girl were behind the poisoning.”

Bruce Moore acknowledged statement. “We just don’t know which one of the crooks was behind this.”

“Man, I say we shoot all those bastards dead,” Sam declared.

“I can’t,” I responded quickly. “We are not killers.”

“Didn’t you just hear what they had planned for your family?”

“Planned, Sam,” I reminded gently, “but they didn’t actually do it, did they?”

“They couldn’t carry out their sick plan because we stopped them in time, but we won’t be around forever to protect your family. Someone’s got to neutralize the threat.”

“I can’t authorize an execution.”

“Wow, I don’t understand you people. I have a daughter too, okay, and lemme tell you something. If those men were hired to kidnap and rape my eleven-year girl, I would shoot those mother*****s without hesitation, and I wouldn’t care if they were successful in carrying out their plans or not.”

“If you are right, then Richard hired over half dozen assassins and kidnappers,” I reminded my friends, trying to keep my voice steady. “We can’t kill so many people.”

Sam clenched his teeth. His face reddened in anger. “Then what are you gonna do, huh? Just sit back and let them kill your sister?”

“Look, it is Richard we are talking about,” I explained. “If we take them out, he’ll hire twenty more. We have to come up with an alternate plan.”

“I never realized there were this kind of evil people in our world,” Sam sighed. “Man, I really regret having two girls. I don’t know if I’ll be able to protect my daughters from this kind of scums all my life.”

Bruce Moore laced his fingers behind his head and shook his head. “You worry about *your* kids, Sam? After investigating the dangers facing John’s family, I decided never to have kids in the first place. This is not a suitable world to bring in innocents for your enemies to exploit.”

“Those son of b****es think they can f*** with innocent lives and get away with it,” Sam fumed. “Don’t those criminals have daughters of their own? Where’s the humanity?”

Sam’s protégé looked distracted. “I wouldn’t go so far as to call them criminals, Sam. Some of those guys were ordinary field agents who fell into debt and needed money. I think Richard’s offer to them sounded too lucrative for them to refuse. They are not the typical killers-for-hire or a part of some shady mercenary group.”

“Don’t tell me they are good guys, Bruce,” Sam shouted. “What kind of sick characters agree to sell a little girl into a sex ring and have her gangraped?”

“I know, it is bad, terrible what they had planned for his sister, but all I am saying is that I ran background checks on the hired men. Most didn’t have criminal records. Some had families of their own. The German guy- who became a naturalized American citizen in 2009- has a daughter of his own. He is running for mayor in his home state. The Russian Israeli has a family and works overtime for the IDF. They are all over forty, looks decent with no police record.”

My former NSA colleague spoke markedly. “Remember the bank monitoring app your friend Dustin had installed inside Federal Reserve Bank? Well, the CIA has been monitoring all incoming and outgoing transactions and I was notified of an anomaly in Cynthia’s dad’s account. The app detected a spike in Richard’s financial dealings on August of last year.”

“What sort of spike?” I wanted to know. “Deposit or withdrawal?”

“It was both; that is what alerted us. One of the shell companies Richard had used in the past to funnel in whitened money became very active. The company deposited roughly thirteen billion Czech Koruna to an account belonging to a Czech national by the name of Hanuš Lebenhart.”

“Thirteen billion?” I repeated, quickly converting the amount into dollars in my head. “Why did this Lebenhart receive so much money from Richard?”

“That’s the thing. Exactly fourteen days later, the money was returned to the same shell company that sent it.”

I wanted to be sure I heard correctly. “The exact amount was *returned*?”

“Precisely. Hanuš Lebenhart returned that money for some reason. But our curiosity was aroused by then so we tracked the guy down just to make sure he is not into some covert money laundering scheme.”

“What did you find out?”

“We didn’t,” Sam admitted. “Philippe Lafont did.”

I nodded, recalling Liam’s old acquaintance at the GIGN, who had voluntarily taken up the task of protecting my family.

Sam continued. “After we told him about the Czech national, Philippe tracked him down to a safehouse in rural Nový Dvůr, of the Czech Republic. Philippe briefly held him in French custody. Hanuš Lebenhart was eager to cooperate in exchange for having all criminal charges dropped. During interrogation, Lebenhart admitted receiving hundreds of millions of US dollars from a contact in Washington.”

“Did he say why he was paid so generously?” I asked. “Or how he came to know this *contact* in the first place?”

“He knew Richard from before- had helped him secure a mining deal in Prague. But this time, when Richard met him, he had a unique proposition. An unconventional job.”

“What did Richard want from this Czech?”

“The exact same thing he wanted Roumen Jeliakov, Bruno Grünewälder and Yakov Raikhverger to carry out,” Sam said, shifting his eyes from one face to another. He looked distraught. “Kidnapping your sister.”

“Again?”

“Yes, he showed us a file he had received from Richard. In it, there were all the tiny details about your family- where they live, which restaurants they frequent, which schools the kids go to, travel itineraries and court records. Lebenhart says his job was to abduct the American girl and hand her over to local Czech human traffickers who would then trap her into forced prostitution. But he was a little confused about the latter part of Richard’s instructions.”

“When was this guy hired?”

“Around 2009, we believe. The Bulgarian assassin was hired at least five years before him. And if we are to trust our sources within Blacksand, Richard had hired five men to kidnap your sister in 1999 and later three additional men were hired in 2000.”

“In 2000?” I gasped. “The kid must have been a toddler at that time.”

Sam Clark said caustically. "Yes, four or five years old. Richard hired a group of professional child traffickers to kidnap the baby girl. They later managed to infiltrate the private Catholic school the girl studied at and posed as teachers before trying to abduct the kid several times."

"Your Blacksand contact wasn't lying," I said suddenly. "I remember now. My family was under attack around that time. The eldest son of the Russian woman was nearly assassinated. And the family got so frightened, that they decided to leave the United States and relocate to the India or East Pakistan- where the dad was originally from."

Bruce looked surprised. "So, they just dropped everything and left in the middle of the school year?"

"The little girl's father was a senior scientist at a tech lab and quit his job after he heard his son was about to get killed. After the family moved out of the United States, the family did not get under any major attack for the time being."

"John, you did tell me about the 1999 incident. Wasn't it your old KGB friend who saved your mother's life at that time?"

I nodded affirmative.

Sam appeared eager to share his knowledge with the team and addressed his protégé. "John was framed for a murder back in 1996, and when he faced the death sentence, his buddies from Russia came to see him and promised to look after his family, and good thing they did because his mother and the little kids were targeted by Richard soon after."

Bruce looked on eagerly. "What happened to them?"

"A bunch of pedophile mother*****s tried to kidnap the six-year-old girl from her school and sell her into a child trafficking ring in Brussels, and they even killed two of the Russian security guys and bought off couple of other in the process."

"Woah, you are saying the security team that was supposed to protect John's family sold them off to traffickers?"

"Anyone can be bought for the right price." The former Agency officer folded his arm. "The Russian guy - Igor Korabelnikov - meant well and he hired his best men to protect the family but it wasn't enough. After he identified a handful of double agents among his men, Igor reshuffled his entire security staff and was vigilant about who could have turned. The traffickers Richard hired had realized by then that John's family had a security team shadowing her, so they directed their efforts in buying them off with handsome rewards and untraceable cash."

"The men we tracked down are ordinary assassins and gangsters. Were the men back in 2000 really child traffickers?" Bruce Moore inquired.

"Yes, it was a transnational ring and when they were apprehended, police discovered an enormous cache of files on children. The database of the pedophile ring contained more than five million pictures and videos of male and female victims all under the age of eleven and some as young as just a few months old."

"And the sick perverts managed to enroll in the school roster as teachers?"

Sam shrugged and turned away from his protégé. "The fake English teacher struck a plea deal with the police and admitted that he was offered ten million dollars if he could kidnap the little girl from her private school and sell her into child sex-rings in Europe. His employer gave them strict instructions to videotape all the abuse in order to claim their reward."

"Sickf*****s!" Bruce muttered under his breath. "What about the fake teachers in her school? Did they physically try to kidnap John's baby sister?"

"Yes, they had blueprints of her school and the house, but were probably planning to make a move but hesitated because Igor's men were protecting the entire family. Igor's main security guy who died trying to apprehend one of the traffickers radioed for backup moments before he had been shot. He alerted the remaining team members that two fake teachers were planning to kidnap the six-year-old and had a getaway boat fitted with all sorts of bondage equipment. The backup team arrived *before* the kidnappers could make their move. One of the arrestees later claimed their Plan B was to kidnap the girl while she was on her way home and transport her across Lake Ontario and into Canada, where seven members of the notorious Mudigano underground dynasty had arranged to sell the child to the highest bidder on the darknet child pornography sites."

"Who is Mudigano?"

I answered. "Mudigano clan was one of Canada's oldest crime families, whose roots in the area of Ontario can be traced back to 1929."

"I've heard of the Canadian mafia, but as far as I know, they weren't into child trafficking." It was Vyacheslav Puzanov who commented dryly. "Mudigano clan came from the Italian region of Calabria, correct?"

I nodded. "Yes, they were the remnants of the 'Ndrangheta mafia, but later moved their entire operation to Canada. Sam, do you think they run human trafficking business?"

"They are not known for that," Sam assured him, "but Richard paid them twenty million US dollars to facilitate the transport of the little girl. And we are talking about the year 2000. Twenty million meant a lot those days, especially to defunct crime dynasties. It's a wonder what some people would do for money."

"You lost me there for a second," Vyacheslav interrupted. "You mentioned darknet- how's it different from the internet?"

Bruce gave him the reply. "The darknet is essentially a subset of the internet that is hidden from standard web browsers. It is a hub for criminals because they can use it to conceal illegal activities by using free routing software which hides their location by relaying information across the internet and create complex trails of access that make it difficult, if not impossible, for police to track a user's online movements. People sell illegal data such as opioids, stolen credit cards and weapons via the darknet. It is a hub for human traffickers who use it to sell children to pedophiles. It was on several of the darknet child-porn website that Igor's men found profile of the little girl. John's little sister, I mean."

Vyacheslav stamped his feet on the ground. "Selling a six-year-old girl into a sex ring? That's insane."

"Richard paid them a lot of money," Sam remarked.

"What kind of perverted minds would ever agree to do something so terrible? It's sick!" Bruce was saying heatedly.

"I agree, but to me it seems the main sick f*** is Richard. What does he think he'd gain by kidnapping the child and selling her into a child sex ring?"

Bruce took a deep breath and glanced at Sam. "How were Igor's men so certain that the traffickers were after John's sister in particular? Not some other kid?"

"There were hundreds of still shot, photos of the kid playing in the backyard, school playground and even taking walks in the park with her mother. They had been shadowing her since the start of the academic year. Their transport vehicles were also loaded with cameras and other equipment that are usually used to make porn movies." Sam fell silent, as though lost in thoughts.

"That's the scariest thing to happen to someone, to have little kids being targeted by halfa**ed f***ers." Sam's protégé spoke with feelings.

Sam nodded. "And the astonishing part about it is that John had no idea his family was under all these attacks. His friend Igor contacted him when he got ill and was in his final stage of cancer. He called to apologize, saying he was sorry he couldn't keep the family and the little girl protected forever."

"Why didn't they involve the NYPD? I'm sure the police have separate unit for child protection."

"He did." I said, recalling what my friend told me years ago. "After Igor discovered the presence of a trafficking ring, he alerted the police and they conducted massive raids in the vicinity. Three rented villas adjacent to my mother's house were completely rigged with cameras and twenty-three members of an Eastern European child trafficking ring were living in those houses."

Bruce exhaled. "So, the crooks were apprehended then?"

"Many of Richard's men escaped the country and fled to Belgium and France before the NYPD was able to obtain warrants for their arrests." I told him. "Igor personally got in touch with Europol's Executive Director who then authorized a joint operation involving police from Belgium and France. They teamed up with Eurojust and rounded up most of the remaining members of the human trafficking gang. Anti-trafficking units in the EU Member States and Europol also offered their assistance and helped identify nine of the girl's kidnappers including the fake teacher in her private Catholic school."

"And your family's house- the creepy neighbors were apprehended, right?"

"NYPD mobilized forces and surrounded the three rented villas. The operation, initiated by New York's human trafficking task force, rounded up over a hundred members of the pedophile ring. It was believed to be the largest anti-human trafficking operation in state history."

A mild frown formed on Sam's forehead. "Yeah. I was in the DEA that year. I remember the raid. It was a multi-agency raid spearheaded by the U.S. Marshals Service and included fifty law enforcement agencies. If I recall correctly, the authorities seized forged ID cards and passports, counterfeit birth and marriage certificates, mobile devices, gold jewelry and evidence of money transfers in those villas. The traffickers were armed to their teeth."

"Even the ones who fled to Europe," I recalled. "Following the New York raid, the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation arrested and interrogated eleven suspects in Romania. Among them was an assassin known as the Vulcan. I knew the alias. Richard had used him to assassinate a member of the British parliament as well as the president of the General Council of Corrèze. He admitted to killing a school nurse in the little girl's school during the time of the attempted kidnapping."

"Did the police find out why he killed the school nurse?"

"Yes, it was strange because the assassin said he killed the nurse in order to keep the award money for himself."

"Award money?" Vyacheslav exclaimed in horror.

“Yes, Richard sort of promised to pay the full hundred million to whoever delivered the child to the traffickers first, so there was a sick competition going on.” I closed my eyes to quell the tide of pain that was welling in my chest. “The assassin noticed the school nurse was also paid so he killed the competitor in order to pocket the profit and kidnap the girl himself.”

“What kind of school did the little girl go to?” The senior SVR officer asked. “Did it have enough security?”

“She was enrolled in an all-girl Catholic day school in upstate New York. Security there was stringent. Children of senators, congressmen, entrepreneurs and celebrities studied there. It was really an elite school, with rigorous academic and athletic programs. Security was high so the kidnapping attempt didn’t go too smoothly. The child traffickers planned for months and may have even succeeded if the parents didn’t pull the girl out of school in the middle of the academic year and bolt for another continent.”

Vyacheslav inquired. “Both parents decided on the move?”

I shrugged my shoulder. “Well, Igor’s men had the family under audio and video surveillance. He did mention that the father was eager to quit his job at AT&T and leave the country when the eldest son came under attack. The kid was barely thirteen when gunmen hired by Richard tried to shoot him down while he was directing a religious service next to his high school. The Russian woman and her husband had a lot of argument about moving to India but ultimately, she agreed to leave when he claimed these attacks were likely racially motivated hate crimes. We were fortunate. The entire family moved out of the kidnapper’s grasp just weeks before they planned the actual grab.”

“And they lived in India all these years?”

“Not entirely, they left for London soon after. Then I heard the family moved to Japan for two years before returning to New York.”

Bruce whistled ominously. “If I had known we were dealing with a piece of dogs**t like Richard who pimps out little girls and sells kids to child traffickers, I would have been less surprised to learn about the assassins and pedophiles he hired.”

Vyacheslav spoke up. “I am curious, Bruce- what exactly did Richard ask Lebenhart to do?”

“The Czech guy?” Bruce said. “Richard specifically asked him to hire dozens of Czech and Slovak criminals to assault her and record the sexual encounters for him. He said he needed the photos and videos for a job.”

“What did the Czech do? Did he try to comply?”

“Not entirely. I’ve read the transcript of his interrogation,” Sam Clark recounted. “Upon receiving his first payment, Hanuš Lebenhart said he began to prepare for the abduction but wanted to do his own research into the victim before proceeding. He said he wanted to be sure there were risks involved. Three of his men followed your sister for a week and they reported back on their findings. They discovered that your sister had become a nun and had taken vows of poverty in order to lead a monastic life. She was a regular churchgoer and frequented local cathedrals. Lebenhart told us that at his point, he realized that his victim was a bride of god and began to have reservations about selling her into sexual slavery. He also had previous experience working with Richard and saw how he had the habit of eliminating his employees as soon as a job was complete. To receive half a billion dollars for a seemingly effortless job sounded too good to be true so he seriously feared Richard may not have plans of keeping him alive after the job was done. However, since he had already accepted the first installment of the payment, he promptly returned the entire amount so that Richard would not retaliate.”

“Is he still in custody?” Vyacheslav Puzanov asked.

Sam shook his head. “Philippe convinced Interpol to release him since he was certain Hanuš Lebenhart did not pose any further threat to the Russian woman and her children.”

“How could he trust a man who had agreed to smuggle an American citizen into sexual slavery?” Vyacheslav fumed openly.

Bruce Moore answered calmly. “The same reason we decided to *turn* Dragoljub Kunarac instead of prosecuting him.”

“Excuse me, but who are you talking about?” I interrupted.

“Dragoljub Kunarac- a Serbian arms dealer who was arrested by US border patrol agents while crossing in from Mexico.” Bruce stated. “It was by sheer chance that we were alerted of his presence. Following usual protocol, the border security agents forwarded Kunarac’s electronic devices to FBI’s Cyber Investigative task force. My buddy from Quantico emailed me the contents of the Serb’s laptop. It was the same sick sh** about kidnapping a student of an Ivy League school in New York City and make hundreds of sex tapes with her. I called Sam right away and we personally interrogated the suspect.”

“Did he say who hired him?”

“He didn’t need to. We tracked all his wire transfers. Dragoljub Kunarac had already received the first installment of a hundred million dollars from Richard, and was promised another half billion if he could deliver hundred or so sex videos with different men. When we told him he’d be arrested and sentenced to life in prison for attempted kidnapping, money laundering and illegal weapons

trade, Kunarac agreed to cooperate and offered to be our double agent. It was his idea. He volunteered to go to Richard and pretend he was still a loyal employee. That way, we were able to track the money trail that has been weaving across the Atlantic.”

“Turning Kunarac- was it useful?”

“I would say we got a head start,” Sam admitted. “Following our deal, Dragoljub Kunarac requested Richard to wire him large amounts of cash into accounts we had hotwired beforehand. That was how we were able to notify the Department of Treasury and the IRS promptly seized nearly a billion dollars from Richard’s numbered accounts.”

“Does Thompson still work at the Bureau?” Bruce asked his boss.

“No, he is a *former* FBI special agent,” Sam clarified, “but he is doing whatever he can to maintain stringent security for the family.”

“Then why don’t we ask him to tip off the FBI?” The CIA officer suggested, knitting his brows with purpose. “They have jurisdiction on US soil and would be able to arrest all the hired men who are inside the country. Our intel confirms that Bruno Grünewälder and Roumen Jeliakov haven’t left the country yet. If the FBI grabs them now, we can neutralize the threat partially. As for Hanuš Lebenhart and the Serbian arms dealer, Dragoljub Kunarac; neither ever set foot on US soil. And the Russian-Israeli agent, Yakov Raikhverger- well, he has been living in Lebanon for the past four years, so they can’t be arrested anytime soon.”

Sam chewed his lips. “Any particular reason Raikhverger is in Lebanon?”

“We don’t have too many confirmations about this but it is believed he has a wife who lives in Beirut- a kid, too,” Bruce replied. “Anyway, as I said before, all these men who were hired to abduct your sister are ordinary citizens, family men leading normal lives. Now, we could contact Interpol and ask them to issue arrest warrants.”

“I don’t think arresting these men would be a wise thing to do,” I remarked.

There was a silence as Sam, Vyacheslav and Bruce considered my proposition.

“You are going to let them walk?” Sam Clark demanded incredulously.

I pleaded with the team. “What grounds do we have to arrest them?”

“What do you mean?” Sam was saying. “We have evidence of their crime! Those men took money from Richard and planned to do so many terrible things.”

“I know that,” I began, but Sam interrupted again.

“I don’t think you do. Did you even hear about the mass-murder fiasco one of the mercenaries pulled off recently?”

“Murder?” I repeated. “Who did they kill?”

Sam Clark’s eyes flashed in anger. “Those motherf**ers were framing your family for a load of crimes, including cold blooded murder. Seemed like they were hoping to have that young kid arrested for homicide.”

“They?” I asked.

“We identified one of the aliases of the main culprit. He goes by the name of Enric Franceschini. A former Army commander in the US Army, but believed to have been dishonorably discharged, after some of his criminal activities were discovered by the Signal Intelligence Corp.”

I was puzzled by the anger in Sam’s voice, so I begged them to clarify. “How do *they* benefit if my sister was framed for a crime?”

“The disgraced former Army commander was hoping she would be the most wanted person on the FBI, SVR and Interpol’s list. The most serious attempt was taken several months after this incident.”

“What sort of incident?” I inquired.

“A frame job,” Bruce Moore answered, “but this time, it was more than mere framing. We identified the mastermind after scouring through hundreds of security footages.”

“Yes, I was on duty,” Sam confirmed. “I covered the case very closely. This young American nun was in her junior year in this Ivy League school, when she and a handful of her classmates participated in a group project of translating and reproducing ancient texts. This required extensive help from external sources, and our security team which monitors your family’s internet traffic caught some activities on social media and other websites where your sister and her friends sought help from native speakers of some Semite and Scandinavian languages.”

“How was this suspicious?” I wanted to know. “What made you monitor this activity so closely?”

“It was due to a website this young novice was using. I believe the app was called ‘TalentWork’ and millions of workers and freelancers registered on that website to do contract jobs like editing or translating. Your sister and her friends had been exchanging urgent messages for over a week, before we finally intervened.”

I was stunned to hear this, so I asked. “What did you find?”

"Your sister and her college classmate hired several freelancers online. The reason for her and her friend's anxiety was that five out of the seven freelancer she had hired and paid for the service, stopped responding to their messages. They had promised to deliver a project, but at the last moment, they went dark. We learned about this from their WhatsApp group chat and emails. So, I set my tech team to see what had happened to the five freelancers who were hired to translate some documents. It was a shocking discovery." Sam said mournfully. "Even for me."

Bruce nodded in affirmation. "We found that all of them had been murdered."

"Murdered?" I repeated. "By whom?"

"By young women, all of whom matched your sister's description." Bruce told me. "But, we knew she didn't kill them. She didn't even leave the United States during that week, and certainly did not travel to Europe."

"It appeared that the app called TalentWork was compromised. Approximately, one freelancer that your sister and friends had hired was killed each weekend on average."

"On weekends only?"

"Yes, it seemed that the people who were trying to frame her had this carefully planned out. They knew she would be home on the weekends, and likely logged into the app on her computer terminal, so they used that window to use her account to make it look as though she killed those men and women."

I was shocked. "But how could they frame her? She was home the entire time."

"It was gruesome, because this young nun was emailing them via the TalentWork app, young women who wore face masks resembling your sister, had gone to the specific locations of those freelancers and killed them in execution style."

I asked again. "How could you know all this for sure?"

Bruce explained calmly. "We tracked those assassins using our recon satellites and before they could kill the next person on the list, we were there in front of that residence, waiting for them. That was how we positively identified one of the main killers."

"Right," Sam confirmed, "and of course, we also discovered a CCTV camera installed in the area right before the murder was to take place. It was done intentionally, so the assassin could kill the victim in front of the camera, and implicate your sister. Those criminals were not only professionals, but they were all female, around your sister's weight and height. One actually wore a silicone face mask to pose as a look alike like the nun. It was all supremely bizarre, as though something straight out of a Tom Cruise movie."

"Did you guys arrest that assassin right away?"

"Of course, we did. We handed the killer over to Interpol, but before that, we made her take us to safehouse where we found nearly a dozen of passports including one with your sister's real name."

"Did you find out where they made those forged passports?" I asked pointedly.

Again, Sam replied. "Yes, that was even more damning discovery for us. The mercenary Richard had recruited to kidnap your sister was so thorough in his framing, that he used a bank account which was registered in your sister's name to buy those murder weapons and the forged passports."

"A bank account?"

"Yes, but it was worse than an ordinary bank account. It was a joint account with several known wanted international criminals. That pimp really wanted to make your sister look like the biggest terrorist in the world."

My Russian friend spoke this time. "We became suspicious after we intercepted messages of her expressing concern to other members of this group projects, as to what could have happened to the freelancer who were helping them with the translation. The college students were worried as to why the freelancers stopped responding, even though they had been previously paid and had agreed to deliver the project in time."

"One of the nun's friends contacted the main website admin and they informed the nun that six of the nine freelancers were dead, and this news began to brew much concern in the group, so much that we decided to intervene. Katie, who is the head of the nun's personal security, requested us to do a thorough check on the Wi-Fi and the nun's internet traffic to make sure no one else was hacking into the family's main server. And you can imagine, our utter shock when we found out that the entire scheme was a giant trap the pimp had set out for her, in both Europe and America."

I inquired. "What were they actually planning?"

Bruce Moore replied tersely. "The assassins were scheduled to murder those freelancers under the full view of the camera to frame your sister."

"The police didn't arrest the nun even after seeing camera images of the crime?"

"No, the police never saw those doctored footages from the camera, because prior to escaping, the assassins took the camera and the memory card with them."

“Why?”

“My guess is that they noticed us, and our extended security team, and knew it would be impossible to frame her at this time. Their overarching objective was to neutralize all of us, before finally putting out a hit on her. That way, there would be no one out there fighting to prove her innocence.”

“Yeah, and they would then be able to use all their hackers and billions of dollars to frame her for numerous crimes, and have her arrested and finally kidnap her from there.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You are sure they have begun to target you and Sam, along with the rest of the protective detail?”

“Positive.” Bruce confirmed. “I know this because two of our men have already died. I mean two of us- not the first, or the second layer auxiliary security personnel, but actually people like us.”

“How on earth did they ever track you all?”

Sam spoke sharply. “We are not sure yet, but clearly Richard supplied them with State-of-the-Art technology and they are using it to hunt us.”

“Who did they manage to track so far?”

“You remember Jimmy?” Sam questioned.

“The old fellow. Yes.” I nodded. “He was very kind.

“Jimmy died of an apparent heart attack recently.”

“But didn’t he already have some level of heart problems?”

“Yes, but his health was in good condition, and doctors recently placed only one cardiac stent in him. I am certain he was assassinated but they wanted to make it look like an accident. And Mikey was also found dead. Shot with a pistol, which ironically belonged to Bruce.”

“They framed Bruce for Mikey’s murder?” I exclaimed. “Insane!”

“That is the plan, I think.” Bruce commented grimly. “They want us to turn against one another, hoping they will be able to destroy this nun’s protection detail permanently. They are betting that if we all start to kill each other, then no one will remain to protect your sister.”

As Bruce Moore spoke, I felt my head swimming in confusion and despair. It was heartbreaking. I wanted to scream in sadness. My brain felt nauseated. Mikey and Jimmy are gone. Did they really die for me? I remembered the time when Jimmy had visited me in prison, and he volunteered to look after my family as long as he was alive. He swore he would protect my adopted mother and her children even if I was not around. I never asked him to do this service for my family, but he did anyway. A selfless friend, who paid with his life to keep my family safe. My heart was deluged with guilt as I thought of these dear friends who took my family under a protective wing, and now, were dead, due to Richard’s sickness? Cynthia’s stepfather had really gone too far in trying to punish me. How much more will I have to suffer? How many more of my loved ones must die before this madness ends? I wanted to shout out these questions to the world, so loudly, that everyone who was alive could hear and understand my grievances.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I gripped Sam’s arm. “I am sorry, man.” I whispered, fighting the insane urge to cry. “I am so sorry you all are suffering for this because of me. Thanks for helping my family. If it weren’t for you guys, my mother and sister would have been gone a long time ago. They would have been tortured to death by now. You all did so much for me, that I could never imagine anyone doing this much.”

I choked on my own words and ceased speaking. It was a terribly painful thought to think for even one moment that Richard and his hired men will try to kill Bruce and Sam.

Bruce Moore answered gruffly. “Hey, don’t you worry about us.”

Sam nodded. “We are not even doing this for you. We just hate Richard and we won’t let that old f***er get the satisfaction of messing with your sister, the way he f***ed your country and destroyed each one of us in his own twisted way. So, I am doing this as a payback. Anyway, you should know that one of the freelancers who was murdered lived in Norway. The other lived in Germany. Two of them lived in Denmark. And one was in the United States. Was murdered in his Texas ranch. We eventually traced the hack on your sister’s internet connection and realized that the man who was framing remained updated with who your sister had hired online. That Enric Franceschini I told you about. Then he used her identity to travel to that specific country and kill that man.”

“I don’t understand how Enric Franceschini could use a young girl’s identity?”

“He forged passports, which were nearly identical to the one your sister carries. The guy is believed to have connections with underground criminal networks and other mafia groups. He managed to pull off this international crime. And eyewitnesses in

Copenhagen and Berlin told our investigators that a young woman resembling your sister showed up at the murdered men's apartment hours before they were killed."

"Where did that lookalike woman come from?" I said.

Sam answered this time. "We tracked her down to a warehouse in Amsterdam. It seemed that the pimp who was orchestrating the entire frame job had hired look alike women who resembled your sister and those women were then furnished with forged passports and told to kill certain individuals. All the freelancer workers your sister and her colleagues had hired in the United States and Europe."

I was confused. "Why did he take all the trouble of traveling overseas and kill people in Europe?"

"We believe it was due to international uproar." Bruce Moore explained. "Enric Franceschini wanted your sister to be the most wanted person not only in the United States but also in Europe, so Interpol and Europol would begin a man hunt for her. In which case, even we and our numbered security teams would be unable to protect her from the imminent arrest. Fortunately, we captured the actual killer and recovered the forged passports in time. Before the pimp got the chance to kill all of us, and have her arrested by an international police force."

"How exactly did he pull off the online murders?" I asked.

Bruce replied. "This was more than a typical frame job, because we cross referenced the men and women he killed so far, and it seems that anyone who your sister interacted with or offered a translation job, was killed by someone who closely resembled her. We began to observe the latest victim and found the assassin who was headed there to execute him. A young woman carrying identification papers like the American nun. But we did alert Interpol in time."

I inquired again. "Interpol knows the truth about what had happened, correct?"

"Yes, they do know, but we faced a bigger problem here in the United States, when the same culprit tried to pull off another dangerous stunt on your adopted mother's family, and the little daughter in particular."

"Why were they doing all this?" I asked in despair. "What could anyone gain by framing a college student for murder?"

"The nearby precinct was corrupt," Sam announced grimly. "Several police officers were receiving regular bribes from those human traffickers. Those mercenaries had a deal with the cops to hand her over after they had arrested her."

Bruce Moore sighed, and addressed me directly. "This frame job was more grotesque. We noticed there was a picture online of your sister, and there was a profile, with a lot of recruiting going on, that showed she is constantly recruiting far right extremists in the United States to carry out acts of terror, and when they agree, she sends them the weapon. Of course, the user is the pimp using her identity. Then, we followed up on the intel, and saw that the shootings that took place were all related to the account that used your sister's picture and name."

"Did you interview the shooters, and try to find out who really hired them or who sent them the weapon?"

"We wanted to but they were all dead."

"Who killed them?" I asked.

"No one. They died from their own weapon."

"I don't understand."

"It was the strangest crime I had ever seen. Somehow, the weapon that was mailed to them, from presumably your sister's impersonator, was defective. It was rigged in such a way, that after firing off five bullets, the sixth one was designed to exit from the rear, essentially killing the shooter instantly."

"Oh, no. They all died?"

"All seven mass shooters, who were recruited from that imposter account, and was supplied with weapon from the same address."

"What was the agenda? Why did the man who was framing her, use her name and picture to open an account just to recruit some skinheads and make them carry out mass shooting only to kill them afterwards?"

Bruce answered slowly. "We found out that it was an elaborate frame job, that was supposed to be reported to the FBI. Once the FBI would see all these evidences of her recruiting and then carefully murdering so many young Americans, the case would have gone straight to the Grand Jury and she would have been locked away in a supermax for another hundred years."

"What happened after that?"

"We traced the account very closely," Sam reported, "and tracked down the IP address from which the user was logging in using your sister's name and image. It was a run-down munitions factory owned by Enric Franceschini. As soon as we had a positive location, we alerted the authorities."

"Why didn't the framer give all the evidence to the FBI and pin all the crime on the Russian woman's daughter?"

"He had plans to but I believe he wanted to get rid of our team first." Vyacheslav spoke up suddenly. "Did you know that Sasha was murdered?"

"When?" I shook my head. "How?"

"He was found in an alleyway near your family's home," Vyacheslav said. "He was stationed as a guard. And ironically, the knife that was used to kill him belonged to your old friend Liam."

"Liam?" I gasped.

"Yes, someone murdered Sasha and framed Liam for it," Vyacheslav confirmed bitterly.

"Who was it?"

"We are assuming it is the same group or man who was framing your sister for all those murders. But this time, he was attempting to take out and naturalize members of her security team, one by one. Enric Franceschini attempted to turn us against ourselves."

"That is twisted," I commented in a low voice, trying to keep my emotions under control.

"I will agree with that," Sam nodded. "However, that was not all they did. We know that this mobster planted spies and potential kidnappers in your sister's school as well."

"But that's the thing- they planned," I reminded my friends. "None of them actually succeeded."

"Thanks to us, and the security team you kept in place," Bruce interjected.

"Yes, that is why I say we keep an eye on the family. Make sure they are safe."

"Sure, we can triple the security, but are some precautions we should put in place?"

"Such as?"

"We can't allow them to go anywhere near India," Bruce Moore stated authoritatively. "Access to AI is remote in Southeast Asia, satellite imagery there sucks and we simply don't have that kind of manpower to protect them in the bustling cities."

"I feel that we should add London to the list of no-fly zones," Sam said heavily. "The Bulgarian assassin has a lot of contacts in England. He was part of an Eastern European crime syndicate in London. If he went as far as to hire Indian gang leaders to have your sister kidnapped, then we should assume he'll do the same in London."

I looked inquiringly at my friend. "Sam, you lost me there for a minute," I raised a hand to catch his attention. "Why are you saying India has become a danger zone for my family? Isn't the Russian woman's *husband* from India? They visit all the time. Why would a gangster be after them?"

"Your entire family was visiting their ancestral land eight months ago to attend a funeral."

"Whose funeral?" I asked, trying to remember any recent deaths in the family.

"The grandmother's," Sam offered. "The Indian man's mother. The old lady had died from age related complications and was buried in the family graveyard, somewhere along the border region. Like Thompson always does, he sent a team of Dutch security forces to be their bodyguard and protect the family, although no one was expecting them to come to any harm in such a densely populated country."

"So, what happened?"

"The complete unexpected. The family was traveling by road- in two separate cars. They were on their way to the grandmother's burial place in the village but your sister suffered from food poisoning and stayed behind in the city. Two security personnel remained at the city residence while one vehicle set off after the family members. But following them closely was proving to be impossible because of the unpaved muddy single lane roads. The Dutch guards who were later debriefed told us that they saw three jeeps and several motorbikes suddenly surround the family's car and hold them hostage. They identified themselves as the local cadres and said they were looking for a young girl. The goons were brandishing a picture, matching it to the face of the passengers in order to find out which one was the girl. But she wasn't there, of course. Your sister was ill and remained behind. By this time, our security team caught up with this convoy and after a brief firefight, the Indian thugs surrendered."

"The family members?"

"They were all right, thank god. Unhurt but very distressed. It was a funeral procession after all."

"What did the Dutch security team do with the gang members?"

"After interrogating the gangsters, we found out about the kidnapping attempt. They said their boss asked them to pick up a girl from this street. Our security made the goons take us to their boss, Sunil Kejriwal, a mob kingpin based in Mumbai. When we arrested and interrogated him, Kejriwal reluctantly admitted being hired by a European man. He said it was a business deal and that he was merely awarded a sub-contract."

"What exactly was Kejriwal hired for?"

"It was an extraction plan, but his directions were somewhat unorthodox. The seven-star gang leader of the Mumbai underworld gave us access to his laptops in which we were able to recover deleted emails and instruction."

Vyacheslav was scowling furiously. "What sort of instructions?"

"I don't know how to describe it, really," Bruce began, "but there were twenty-seven different sample porn videos attached to the messages. The target was identified by name and passport picture."

"Who was the target?" My Russian friend questioned.

"At first we didn't want to believe it; we thought it was a random young girl but then we ran it through a facial recognition app."

"The target?" I insisted.

Sam Clark sighed. "The target was your sister. We examined the email Sunil Kejriwal received from his European employer. It was disturbing. Your sister's photo was attached to the secure email- with only one order: the Indian gang leader had to make a handful of his thugs rape and assault the girl in question and make sure to replicate each of the porn video that was sent to him. In order to receive payment, he had to videotape the assaults and email his employer photographic evidence of the encounters."

"And the employers were?"

"One person. His name was Roumen Jeliakov."

"Jeliakov?" I repeated. "Wasn't he the assassin your team had identified?"

"Yes, Sunil Kejriwal told us he was a Bulgarian national who had collaborated with him previously in several weapons smuggling stint so they had an understanding. I have to admit that this was the first time we learned that Jeliakov was after your family- following the India incident. The Interpol had been searching for Roumen Jeliakov for years but couldn't pinpoint his location. It was after we intercepted the Indian gang leader's communiqué that we identified yet another man Richard had hired to kidnap and assault your sister. The security team began to flag all of Jeliakov's financial transactions and confirmed that he had received over five hundred million dollars from Cynthia's stepfather," Sam concluded.

Bruce cleared his throat. "There was a piece of random detail Sunil Kejriwal confided in us. He said Jeliakov had warned him that the target would be most likely extremely uncooperative and would be unwilling to make sex videos so she had to tactfully persuaded."

"What?"

"Yes, even I found it difficult to believe. But the Bulgarian employer told Sunil he should use Indian cobra and rattle snake to scare the American girl into complying with their instructions and make those sex videos. They had messaged each other discussing how the intended victim had taken vows to be a nun and would be unwilling to break her promises to god. So, Roumen Jeliakov reasoned somehow that your sister would be terrified of snakes."

"Any particular reason why a stranger from Bulgaria would think the girl suffers from ophidiophobia?"

"It may have something to do with the incident in college," Bruce offered. "It was last summer at her Ivy League university's campus. Apparently, your sister saw a dead cockroach or some sort of bug in the dining hall and she screamed and fainted in terror. The university's public safety officers escorted to the nearby Irving Medical Center to be treated for shock. We know this because the Dutch security team that keeps tab on her were nearby when it happened. It is possible our Bulgarian assassin was watching her at that time."

Vyacheslav Puzanov slapped his forehead in frustration. "This needs to stop, don't you see?" He looked at his American colleagues. "This poor family won't be able to survive these assaults forever."

Sam paced vigorously. "I agree with you, Vyacheslav, but we are doing everything we can to keep this family safe."

"I have a friend at the SVR. He has connections with the remnant of our Solntsevskaya Bratva. I will contact him right away."

"How is Russia's external intelligence agency going to be able to help us?" Bruce inquired.

The Russian agent looked confused momentarily. His eyes glittered as he looked sharply at me. "Oh, I was only thinking about what my dear comrade here had said. You do not wish to kill those animals, yes, so I have a solution for you. If they touch your family again, or ever try to abduct your sister, then I will personally take hostages and use SVR to support me."

"Who are you going to take as hostages, Slava?" I questioned warily.

"Why, the families of those criminals who are harming your mother and sister," Vyacheslav clarified. "If they get near your family, I will take away every last person they had ever loved. My contacts in the SVR and Solntsevskaya brotherhood will make sure they pay for what they did. I am not Americans like you gentlemen. My blood is Russian and in Russia, we take care of our family. And if anyone harms our mothers or sisters, we don't let them walk away."

"Slava, we are official government agents. Taking hostages would be against all international laws. Besides, those men who were planning to abduct my sister may have been evil but their families had nothing to do with it."

"Maybe not," my Russian friend conceded, stamping his foot. "but the criminals would then understand how it feels to lose a loved one, and how terribly it pains the heart to know that the little boys and girls and the pretty wife has been abducted. If they don't feel this pain, they will never desist from their dirty plan."

I felt a helpless rage bursting in me. “All my life, I tried to play everything by the rules. I never believed in taking hostages, kidnapping children of the bad guys. Hurting innocents never had room in my missions, but why are these men even agreeing to this twisted scheme of kidnaping?”

“They are money mongering mercenaries who would kill for a hundred bucks,” Bruce Moore said easily. “A lot of people would do a lot of worse stuff for a lot less cash. Richard offered them millions, even billions. In addition to money, he is dangling carrots in their faces. He promised the Bulgarian-Romanian assassin a senior position at the Vatican. Richard told the German fellow he’d back him in the city election. They are all participating in the sex-trafficking business for the money, I think. I doubt if any of this is personal.”

“I don’t care if they’d been offered the world,” Vyacheslav Puzanov countered heatedly. “I wouldn’t have agreed to hurt and innocent mother and her child even if Richard gave me a hundred billion for it.”

Bruce sighed. “The Dutch security team Sam was monitoring- they did mention an unusual encounter. It was four months back.”

“What sort of encounter?” I wanted to know.

“They came across five members of a Delta Force unit,” the junior Agency officer said. “The delta team had been shadowing your family and when one of their members was apprehended by our security, he admitted being hired for an extraction job.”

“Extract whom?”

“The girl- I mean your sister. The team leader, who was a Sergeant Major in Delta Force, told our guys that his group was hired by a covert government anti-terror organization for this mission. They had specialization in high value target extraction.”

“The mission parameters?”

“Since it was an off the books op, they thought it was officially government sanctioned work. They were supposed to pick up the girl and hand her over to another exfil team near the Mexican border.”

Vyacheslav huffed in annoyance. “If they are Delta force, then they were supposed to *verify* if their orders came from the government.”

“One of the delta operators did mention that their employer, who was obviously unnamed, claimed the girl’s father was a notorious terrorist and they needed the girl for leverage, to extract intel. But he said two of his team members were having second thoughts about the operation.”

“Why?”

“Because of the money.” Bruce Moore replied. “The Delta force leader told our Dutch security men that each of his colleague received five million dollars for the job. The Delta sniper received an extra million. His job was to eliminate any resistance. That probably meant *our* security. And they were offered another five once the package was handed over.”

“They wanted more money?” I questioned.

Sam Clark slanted his head before speaking. “The Sergeant Major said he was a war hero- not a criminal. He did two tours in Iraq and was awarded the distinguished service cross for rescuing some civilians from a burning building. But even then, after all his heroism, the government hadn’t wired him five million for his service. He realized something was fishy in this kidnapping plot so he temporarily delayed the operation even though his team of skilled men had ample opportunity to steal your sister from our care.”

“So, he came clean.” I was speaking to myself.

Sam nodded. “Fortunately, the delta force leader cooperated with us and gave our tech team access to their bank accounts. We tracked the money. It was wired directly from an offshore account that was registered under a known alias of the Bulgarian assassin.”

I couldn’t stifle my gasp. “Roumen Jeliazkov was behind this?”

Bruce raised one of his eyebrows. “I can’t say I was overtly surprised. When we found out Jeliazkov orchestrated the extraction plan, we knew your sister was in more danger than we realized.”

“There are so many things wrong with this narrative,” I protested. “How could a Bulgarian assassin hire a delta force team and convince them to carry out a kidnapping for him?”

“The delta force guys claimed they were under the impression they were working for a clandestine group within the US government. Now, whether they actually believed this was a legitimate operation or not is something we have no way of ascertain. Anyway, the delta team were scheduled to hand the kid over to a man at a medical clinic near Harlingen, Southern Texas. We tipped off the FBI.”

“What did the Bureau find?”

“They raided the clinic and made dozens of arrests. Several wanted criminals, escapees, and eighteen men belonging to the Mexico’s Sinaloa cartel – the largest drug-trafficking organization in the world. FBI also discovered a hidden passage dug beneath the place. The passageway went directly from Cameron County and connected to an industrial site in the Mexican city of Tijuana. It was the

longest smuggling tunnel ever found on the border with Mexico, and was equipped with a rail track, drainage and air ventilation systems, and high voltage electrical cables.”

“Were your men able to question the detainees of that clinic?” My Russian friend asked.

Bruce replied in affirmative. “Counter-narcotics agents on site recovered a large container filled with hundreds of yellow-brown scorpions. I had the look at those creepy things. Nearly eighty mm in length. An entomologist told me those scorpions are found in the eastern parts of Europe, mostly in Albania and Bulgaria.”

Vyacheslav Puzanov looked agitated. “Why were the Mexican drug cartel keeping scorpions in their safehouse?”

“Good questions. I was able to question the arrested goons who were in FBI custody. It seems that the box of scorpions was a gift.”

“A gift?” I repeated.

“The gang leader who paid for the tunnel construction was a senior member of the powerful Sinaloa drug cartel known to his peers as *El Loco*. He cooperated with us in exchange for reduced sentence. According to his sworn statement, the scorpions were shipped to them from Port of Varna, the largest seaport complex in Bulgaria.”

“Did *El Loco* say who shipped it to him?”

“Yes, it was the same man who had hired him in the first place- a man who only gave his first name Roumen. They were scheduled to receive a *package* from Roumen Jeliakov. Target was a young American Ivy League university student who would have been handed to them by a US army team. The cartel members were instructed to wait in the safehouse until the girl arrived, then torture her into submission. Roumen specifically asked them to use the scorpions into frightening the kid. He mentioned it would be easier to control her that way as she suffered from arachnophobia.”

“I don’t understand,” my Russian friend was rubbing his forehead. “Why would Roumen Jeliakov tell a Mexican cartel to torture this girl with scorpions?”

“They had one job- the men had to sexually assault her and make sex videos with the girl, and record the encounter. That was the only way they would get paid. Roumen warned them the target was an Orthodox novice who had taken oath of becoming some sort of nun, so she would be unwilling to star in any sort of pornographic video, so hence the scorpions were added to the cart. He also told them to smuggle her out of the United States via the underground tunnel and hand her over to a sex trafficking ring based in Tenancingo, Mexico.” Bruce shot a fleeting glance towards me and lowered his head. “The cartel members were planning to force your sister into prostitution after trafficking her into Mexico.”

“It’s not possible! How?” My head was feeling so heavy that I had to rest it in my hands. “Why is this happening?”

Sam placed a hand on my shoulder. “The threat’s been contained, man. The Departments of Justice and Homeland Security collaborated with Mexican law enforcement counterparts to apprehend the remaining member of this gang who were waiting to pick up your sister from the Mexican end of the tunnel. We are positive that link had been closed permanently. And if the pimps still want to hurt your family, I will personally take care of them.”

Bruce twisted his face. “But all those men who are after John’s family- what if we can’t stop them?”

“Don’t worry, man, let them take her.” Sam growled, almost threateningly. “And if those bastards dare to even stand next to your little sister, we will hunt them down to the end of earth and torture each one to death. They’ll look so bad, even vultures won’t feed on their corpse. It’ll be so bad that the old daughterf****r won’t send anyone after her again ever. He will quit hiring child traffickers to abduct the kid.”

“Nope, that’s too risky. We can’t let those f****s *take* her.” Bruce Moore blurted out. “We can’t let them touch her. If they lay a hand on the kid for one second, she’s destroyed.”

“You look frightened, Bruce. Do you know something we don’t?” I surmised.

“In one of the FBI overseas raid, the special agents recovered a smart tablet. It had several compressed files in it. All of the files were attached to an email address belonging to a known human smuggler who ran several international sex-trafficking rings based in Kathmandu.”

“What were the FBI doing in Nepal?” I asked.

“They operated out of their field office in the Makwanpur District of Bagmati Pradesh in central Nepal. It was after Liam’s men called Sam and told him that a plane was being diverted from its course. It was a nonstop Cathay Pacific flight from NYC to New Delhi, but the pilot abruptly radioed that the fuel was dropping and they had to land in some island near Nepal.”

“I am guessing it was not just any plane.”

“No, your sister was on the flight, John. She was going to see some relatives in India. Two of Liam’s men, the Dutch security team, was on the flight and they alerted us of the anomaly. We did everything we could to keep the flight on its course, but something was wrong with the reception. The island they wanted to land in was a narrow strip in the middle of nowhere. We felt it was a trap. Liam’s

men were getting nervous. The pilot panicked but we made the air traffic controllers order them to stay on course and land in the nearest city, not some godforsaken island. And then we received a broken transmission from the head of her security that two armed men were trying to break into the cockpit and force the pilots to veer and head to the island. We knew the belligerents had something bad planned out but there wasn't much we could do from the ground. Except hope for luck. Then the plane finally landed. The passengers were mostly unharmed but twenty-seven passengers had suffered from near-fatal food poisoning. It seemed that someone had spike the plane's food supply with benzodiazepine, designed to put people to sleep for a long time."

"So, they were safe?"

"Yes, for the time being, but we wanted to inspect the mysterious island anyway. When the feds got there, they reported that it looked like an abandoned army base, but there was a narrow runway, freshly built. But the most disturbing finding was inside the low roofed bunkers. Judging from the garbage dump, the FBI special agents concluded that at least two hundred men were stationed there and were living in those houses. And there were five large rooms with movie making equipment; cameras, shutters, high powered lights, etc. And that was where we found the electronic tablet. Here, I printed the screen shots. If you want, you can skim through these pages."

"These look like articles, Bruce." I commented, scanning the pages briefly.

The CIA officer nodded. "Yes, it looked like a psychological report. It is so detailed that it seems as though a group of highly trained psychologists who specialized in psychotherapy and other forms of psychological treatment wrote this."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the content," he explained. "it was undoubtedly penned by highly trained professionals with expertise in the areas of human behavior and mental health assessment. The subject name is withheld in these reports, but there is a photo. Do you recognize this headshot?"

"My sister?" I squinted in surprise. "Why do these shrinks have her profile dissected?"

"I looked into them. The doctors, or more like scientist, worked at a medical lab in Maryland. They were apparently ordered to study a case, where they were given details about a particular American girl. Their job was to assess her profile and give a prescription on how to break her mentally, physically, and psychologically. After assessing her behavior, the doctors sent a detailed report explaining which method would work best to break her and there are sidenotes beneath each suggestion. The reason I am sharing this with you is because it was beyond horrifying, even for someone who worked in the CIA for years. I mean in all honesty, we employ a psychologist to remain inside the CIA's black site torture room but none of our shrinks ever went this far."

"What do you mean?"

"There are some psychopath analyst working among them, that I am sure of. Look, in the first page, there is list of problems. The report mentions that the subject in question is a young teenager, who had vowed to become an Orthodox nun and chose to embrace a monastic life. Her personality profile list her as carefree, emotional, has self-respect, self-control and a sense of morality. The psychiatrists were instructed to come up with recipes that would make her malleable to, well, human trafficking, so that she would not try to escape from captivity and cooperate with her abductors."

"So, this is all about the traffickers?" I asked.

"Yes, we believe they were waiting on the Nepalese island, hoping the plane would make an emergency landing there. Hundreds of men were there along with equipment to make porn videos, and according to the instruction on this manual, their employer ordered them to force the victim to cooperate in making sex videos, so they had to come up with elaborate torture methods to break her."

"The Russian woman's little girl?" I breathed, not wanting to believe a syllable Bruce was telling me.

"What kind of torture did those sick psychos suggest?" Sam inquired.

"The report is horrible, made me sick to my stomach. They doctors forwarded their suggestions to three men; they had hired them to give an honest assessment and tell them the best ways to handle her. I got to say, I've seen some dirtiest shit in my life. I've worked with cartels and traffickers in South America, China, Africa and the Caribbean but never in my life did I see something even remotely near this kind of pre-planned torture and detailed sickness. It's beyond f****d up. Every time I see these reports, I realize more and more how dangerous the situation is."

"You mentioned three employers?"

"Yes, it appears as though three of the pimps planned to carry out the detailed torture sequence on your little sister while two of the sex traffickers intended to execute her within a few months, possibly fearing retaliation."

"How about if we increased security?"

"We could but the way things are going, it seems her security is falling apart." Sam's protégé guessed. "Two Dutchmen are dead, one was killed in the plane, in a close-range gunfight, and the backup team may get compromised. Those traffickers who were hired to abduct your sister received billions of dollars and they are desperate to earn their pay. Richard gave them unlimited funds to kidnap the

kid, and no security force can resist the temptation. It's a ticking bomb. Today or tomorrow, the security guards will either be paid or blackmailed or killed. The team will crumble and there will be no one to protect your family. Hell, even the POTUS or FLOTUS do not have that many exuberant enemies."

"I don't believe they can beat us," Sam announced. "I've handled worse in my life, okay. Back in 1998, I gave security to an African premier who had eighteen war lords trying to kill him and I kept him alive for ten months while I working on other Agency projects. I can take care of the little girl's safety and I am confident I can handle those child traffickers. Let those bastards show their sick faces."

Bruce protested mildly. "No, Sam, you can't let them come near. Because if they do, that means she's history. There is no coming back from the horror they had planned on the young kid. I read the reports. The team of psychiatrists compiled the detailed article on how to torture her most effectively, based on her likes and dislikes, fears and dreams. It was so f****d up that the tortures could have scared the toughest Navy SEAL out there. They literally wrote explicit details on how to torture her most effectively and what kind of pain would break her psychologically. I read the email one of the psychiatrists sent to the Indian gang leader and a women trafficker based in the Philippines. They advised the abductors to make the American girl starve for several days, because in her profile, it was mentioned that she was raised in opulence. The Indian seven-star gang leader sought advice on how to assimilate your sister into the brothel as a sex worker. The psychologist suggested she be made to lose her self-worth. They told the traffickers to make the other sex worker beat up the girl regularly and make her clean toilets that had human excrement smeared all over it, because according to her profile, the American girl always had staff in her house to do daily chores and was not accustomed to working. She had personal maids to help her in house work so the profilers suggested she be forced to endure ultimate humiliation by cleaning the bathroom that other sex workers used for at least six months. If she did not cooperate, she should be beaten by her peers and urinated upon. And then the traffickers were told they should force her to walk in the filthy drain and march in the middle of the Philippine's slums, and have her raped most brutally by homeless men, street prowlers and drug addicts in order to diminish her fighting spirit."

"Why such gruesome torture?" Vyacheslav stammered.

"Since she was an Orthodox nun, the idea was to demean her in the most vile manner. The psychologist analyzed that this sort of treatment would ultimately destroy her resolve and make her abandon her monastic vows and make her amicable. And another psychiatrist noted that the most effective way to break her spirit would be to disfigure her face, preferably using drops of acid, so that her identity would be erased and she would less like run away from the brothel. There is an entire article dedicated to her known fears."

"What fears?"

"Your sister is terrified of bugs, insects, roaches and rodents. The psychologist made a list of suggestion her as well. They advised the sex traffickers to force the kid to sleep inside roach infested rooms, especially those huge Asian roaches. That is if using snakes and scorpions failed to produce desired results. They also suggested that if she lost her sanity or became too suicidal, the kidnappers should use children to threaten her with, since her personality profile suggests she enjoys teaching kids and would likely not want young children to die for her."

"The novice- I mean your sister- she is a lifetime member of several Christian charity in her Ivy League school. It is written in her personality profile. The psychiatrist knew she liked to do volunteer work and help disabled children, so they figured out this particular method to torture her."

"How did they know so much about my sister? It doesn't make any sense."

Bruce elaborated. "It seems that they retrieved her emotional and personality profile from the internet searches. They checked out her Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter profiles and analyzed her tweets and posts. They studied her profile in order to come up with effective ways to break whatever resistances she has in her. Your sister's online profiles suggested that she loved children and the feeling was reciprocated, so when she got hospitalized due to a stomach flu back in 2015, all the children in her Sunday class and summer school visited her in the hospital until the hospital staff got overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the well-wishers and banned visitors for the whole week. Now, this information could easily be accessed via her IG profile. I am assuming those sick profilers studies each post and made their suggestions to the traffickers."

Vyacheslav Puzanov shuddered visibly. "No man, no women, really, no one in this world- no matter how evil they are- deserve this kind of torture and punishment, no matter what they did, and least of all an innocent little girl like your sister, who had just announced her intention of becoming a nun."

"My God! This *is* bad." Bruce sighed. "Why don't we put her in witness protection?"

"Witness protection?" Sam bellowed. "Are you joking? This old f****r literally created League 13, an NSA black op division right under the nose of the DOD. He has people in every tier of the government. Richard in on first name terms with half the men in the

intelligence departments. You put her in witness protection and with his connections and trillions of dollars backing, it'll take him less than five minutes to locate her and send her to the sick kidnappers and traffickers. He'll just end up using the FBI to abduct her."

"I really wonder why so many people are after me and my family. I never met them, I never harmed them and despite all they have done, all the wounds they tried to inflict, I would still never harm them. If they want money so badly, why can't they earn it in some other way. Even if they had to steal it, it would've been better than agreeing to be an assassin or a child trafficker. Why did they choose to hurt me and my family?"

"I'm sorry to say, but it is kind of your own fault," Sam stated. "Richard sent these men after you and your family because he knows you abhor killing and torturing people. It's the hard truth man, but it's your fault that these f****rs are chasing after you and your loved one. All your life, you've been too nice to people, especially to those who hated you the most. I wonder if you remember how many times you risked your life to save Richard? You worked for the old man for years, and protected him like a personal bodyguard. He knows you are harmless, and now, neither Richard nor his goons are afraid of you. In fact, I'll bet they are terrified of everyone else in the world except yourself, because they know that no matter what they do, you won't hit back because you try to be one of the good guys and try to follow a code. To me, your honor codes look like a series of dumb laws that can get you killed."

"I just wanted to get out of this life, away from Richard..."

"Seriously, John, what can you expect? You serve a snake and don't expect it to sink his fang into your face? I swear those guys won't hurt anyone else in this world, no one but you. Even if I begged them to attack me, they won't come near me because they know- they know what I'll do to them. I don't have to be great to myself. If they are evil, I can be worse, and they are not eager to find out what I'm capable of doing. And that scares them so much that they are never interested in anyone but you."

"If Richard hates me so much, why doesn't he just kill me and get it over with?" I directed the question at my friends.

"He doesn't want to kill you, John. It's obvious," Sam informed me. "Richard knows you don't care about living. All he cares about is hurting you. He wants you to feel ultimate pain. And he thinks the only way to get to you is by hurting your friends and family. You told me yourself. He had contract killers strap a bomb on your friend Viktor because he wanted you to watch him die, and get torn into bits."

"This family is hardly related to me," I protested.

"Richard doesn't think so. He believes they are your family. And that is why he spent over six billion dollars to hire dozens of sex traffickers and pedophiles to assault your little sister. He just wants to hurt you, man. Nothing else matters to him in his f****d up life."

"I wish I didn't exist, Sam, I just wish I disappeared and Richard would then forget I ever existed. I don't mind him trying to kill me, or abduct me. But going after my family- they are innocent civilians. They don't have anything to do with me, or my complicated life. I earned all the hell I got, but they didn't."

"Unfortunately, Richard knows you better than anyone else," Sam reminded me. "He knows how emotional you are. And he also knows physical pain does not affect you nearly as much as emotional experiences. That's why he targeted the kid."

"Sam is right," Vyacheslav Puzanov opined. "Richard had targeted Russian nuclear arsenal depot partially to hit at your soul. He could have stolen French weapons or American warheads but he wants to frame Russia for the destruction. If he manages to detonate the nuclear devices over major cities in Europe, he wants the Europeans to think Russia did it. It is very crude but calculated."

"He is stealing nuclear warheads from Russian military installations, and detonating them over Europe!" My head ached terribly from the very thought. "All of this to get back at me?"

Sam Clark flattened his mouth disapprovingly. "He knows you'll get hurt if Russia gets invaded, so he'll use it."

"If he wanted me dead, he could have killed me a long time ago," I told my friend. "He had plenty of opportunities to do that."

"No, he wants you to suffer," Sam insisted. "He knows your weakness, John. He knows what hurts you the most. He'll hurt those you love. That's why he is targeting the people you care about. To hurt you the most. This is his way of taking revenge. He won't give you a quick death."

"It's not true," I said unconvincingly.

"Yes, John, it is. Have you ever asked yourself why he is so relentless in pursuing you? Why he keeps going after the ones you love?"

"He hates me for taking Cynthia away from him?" I mumbled.

"Maybe, but I doubt that," Sam twisted his face. "That girlfriend of yours, isn't she with some French dude now? And you told me she got married twice in the past decade. Did Richard go around destroying every one of them? Not nearly as much as he harmed you. Do you know why? Because he knows you are weak."

"I am weak?"

“Yes, he knows very well that no matter what he does to you or your family, you’ll just forgive him and let him and his hired assassins walk scot-free.”

“I really believed Richard changed.”

“You told me you had a gun to his head, you could’ve pulled the trigger, ended his miserable life there and then, but no, you had to be noble. Why do you think he never comes after me? Or Curtis? Or anyone else? Because he knows we are not such a cheap weakling like you. We got guts. If he touched our family, if he ever came near my daughters, I would have burned him in a stake for months. And Richard knows that. We both worked in his black op division in NSA, and he decided to become your enemy and not mine. Believe me, even if I f*****d his stepdaughter, he wouldn’t have dared to come near me or my loved ones.”

“Everything in my life is so cursed,” I said softly.

Sam sighed with impatience. “I’m sorry to say that you have brought this hell on yourself, buddy.”

“It’s all my fault!” I stifled a dry sob. “Richard wouldn’t have done any of this if it wasn’t for me.”

Sam shook his head. “Wrong. He would have done these anyway. He is a retard.”

“He wouldn’t have gone nuclear, Sam.” I objected.

“Remember what he did in 2009?” Sam badgered. “We nearly missed his entire plan at that time. The old money-f*****r was cutting weapons deals with West African war lord, and told them they would get an unlimited supply of military grade weapon if they cooperated with him.”

“I am glad we discovered his plans and halted his operations.” I recalled.

The CIA officer went on as though I hadn’t spoken. “If it wasn’t for you, if you hadn’t discovered all the maps, his detailed plans, then there would have been another world war ten years ago. He convinced the war lords to lend him manpower which he wanted to use to invade Libya. His oil analysts told him that Libya holds Africa’s largest proven reserves of oil, so he decided why not just take all of it. Now, trust me when I say this- his invasion of Libya had nothing to do with you or your Russian background.”

“Maybe not, but the underground nuclear testing in Turkey that caused a major earthquake was my fault. He used Russian nuclear warheads to cause that disaster.”

“John, look at me. Richard likes money, and he likes to kill people to get it. It is never your fault. Back in 2009, you prevented him from causing more bloodshed in Africa. At least, you managed to stop and expose his plan to the CIA. Thanks to you, Langley was able to study those maps and blueprints and arrests most of the belligerents. So, stop blaming yourself for everything.”

“He is doing these to frame *me*, Sam.”

“Cynthia’s stepfather wasn’t framing you or Russians when he funded the terrorist organization in those West African nations. He hired those war lords and combine their power to build a super army that would let him invade Libya and other countries effortlessly.” The CIA officer argued. “But we used the intel you acquired and arrested dozens of war criminals and local leaders. Bad things don’t happen because of you. It’s the opposite. Many terrible things didn’t happen in our world because of your passion and hard work.”

“Think about it. If you hadn’t stopped him, Richard would have managed to kill millions of civilian. And before you start protesting again and take all the blame on your shoulder, let me remind you that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had nothing to do with you, but Richard used his influence in the Senate and government to make the congress vote for the war in order secure contracts with Blacksand security. He would have continued wreaking havoc if you hadn’t stopped him so many times.”

“Who is he hiring to work for him these days?” I asked Sam. “Does the CIA have any leads?”

“He hired these guys to do it.” Sam divulged, recovering a page on his phone’s browser. “Some are former military, an ex-green beret, a dishonorably discharged marine, and a major in the Canadian Army. We believe Richard is using him to get access to a nuclear powerplant in Ontario.”

“His profile looks impeccable.”

“Sound like a good person.” Sam asserted. “Makes you wonder why would someone like that ever agree to work for an evil man like Richard?”

“Sam, I’ve known Richard for a pretty long time. I’ll tell you this. That guy has a knack of making people do anything he wants. He is master manipulator.”

“Even so, that man is a mass murderer.” The CIA officer observed.

“Richard knows how to buy a man’s soul.” I admitted. “He owned mines for twenty years.”

“But this Canadian dude is doing all of Richard’s dirty work for him.” Sam retorted.

“Yeah, I’ll bet Richard convinced him these are legitimate government work sanctioned by the president.” I said immediately.

“That’s what I believed when he recruited me to his black op division back in the eighties. This guy probably thinks he’s helping save the world like I did when I was actually doing all of Richard’s dirty work for him.”

"Why do these people work for him?" Sam wondered aloud. "I find it hard to believe they would have faith in his un noble cause."

I emphasized. "They are not believers in his cause, but rather they are probably serving him for the money. He pays them a lot. Being part of a killing machine is shameful- I'm sure they don't know what Richard actually planned. I am sure he convinced those assassins that they are serving a greater cause, I am sure they are misguided."

"Maybe," Sam echoed.

"He had me believe I was working for the NSA when I was actually doing illegal missions for him."

"Yeah, but we were smarter," Sam Clark piped. "Eventually we found out how twisted Richard was and his obsession with money and power made him sick. We were lucky to get out from the black ops team when we did, but he also learned his lesson so now, the goons he hires to do his dirty work for him are not very bright. They are dumb morons who are not capable of distinguishing right from wrong. I guess Richard learned his lesson after we left his service."

"Why is he doing this now?" I lamented. "Why?"

"It's his way of getting back at you." Sam attested. "He thinks you love mother Russia, so he was so desperate to persuade China to invade it."

"Doesn't Richard realize that I am dying?" My throat constricted as I thought about the horrors he had planned to unleash. "What will he possibly gain by destroying Russia? If it was to make me hurt, then he should have stopped!"

"You are forgetting that Richard *believes* you are dead." The Agency officer reminded me. "To him, you died in that chopper accident two years ago, where you so wonderfully staged your fake death, but it did little to stop him from hiring men to kidnap and torture your foster mother or her children."

"I wish I could understand what drives him," I wondered. "I always thought he was reasonable, fatherly even, but slowly, he changed. He wasn't like this when I first joined his black op unit of NSA. He always acted logically and actually tried to bring down organized crime units."

"He always had this evil in him, John." Sam asserted. "You were just too naive to see it. He thinks you are already dead, but he is not stopping his attacks. He is still seizing weapons from Russian military installations and trying to nuke Europe and frame Russia for it, hoping it will trigger a global war where the entire NATO will join force and invade Russia. To Richard, it doesn't matter whether you are alive to see the destruction or not. In fact, I believe if he remotely suspected you are still alive, he would not have dared taken so many bold moves, like shipping in nuclear-tipped missiles to France and Germany. He knows you too well. He knows an attack of this scale just won't be possible if you are breathing. Richard knows very well you would do anything to stop it."

"What would he gain from all this?"

"His thirst for vengeance will be quenched. He hates you so much that he had waited for you to die so that he could fulfil his dream of unleashing terror on your family and your mother's homeland. Now that he is certain you are gone from this world, he is letting his fancy loose and decided to go nuclear."

I didn't speak. The very thought of this scale of destruction was horrifying.

My friend went on. "You know what I wish? I wish I could tell Richard that you still very much around, and that he should stop his sick game of trying to destroy Russia."

"I am *barely* alive," I mumbled. "The doctors warned me that my immune system is on the verge of collapse. I am having new complications every day. I don't know how long my miserable life will last."

"Don't be pessimistic!" My friend rebuked sharply. "Your health *will* improve. You need enough rest, that's all."

"He wants to destroy everyone in the world except his stepdaughter. He is a mentally disabled old man who has no sense of right or wrong." Sam reiterated.

Bruce cleared his throat. "Personally, I think this Richard or whatever his real name is, may still have doubts about your existence. I'm sure a part of him thinks you somehow survived that helicopter accident and survived. These stolen weapons and attempted bomb attacks are probably designed to lure you out of your hiding place." Sam's protégé paused thoughtfully. "It looks to me as though he is placing the bait, hoping you will pounce to save people."

Sam nodded grudgingly. "Bruce got a point. Richard is more than plain evil. That old man is a f*****g lunatic. Obsessing over his stepdaughter messed with his head so badly that he doesn't know anything in the world besides killing people. I think if Richard was sure you were dead, he wouldn't have stopped for one minute. He would've immediately started his project Armageddon."

Sam Clark later told me that his team discovered another deadly plan that some of the kidnappers had prepared if they succeeded in kidnapping my adopted sister. Richard's hired men had planned to kidnap the Russian woman's daughter and kill the whole family and frame her for it. They thought it was the best way to make her helpless, and kidnap her forever by locking her inside a prison complex

for life, and their plan was to make other prisoners torture her. Richard had hired professional criminals and former military contractors and mercenaries to assault the girl. My friend Sam Clark suspected one of the men who used the alias Niccolò Mattarella, and this man was a former military officer, and was one of the lead criminals who was hired by Richard to kidnap my sister. The man was dangerous because he was affiliated with the Apulian and Bavarian Mafia. He also controlled several organized crime units based in Canada and Lithuania. The Mafia boss thought my sister had too much security surrounding her all the time, so he planned to get her away from it by framing her for the murder of her own family. That way, if she went to prison, even her own uncles and brothers would hate her thinking she killed the parents. One of my friends also said that they found out that Niccolò Mattarella had approached the wife of the girl's eldest brother and told her to hand over the girl to him. He told the American sister-in-law that whenever the young girl came to visit her house, she should give him a call, because he was a government agent. Luckily, Sam and his team was able to intercept the call, and raided the sister-in-law's house and told her that the men who were coming to kidnap the Russian woman's daughter were not government agents but were professional criminals and mercenaries who were hired by a dangerous man to assault the girl. They also increased protection of the Russian woman and her family and tried to keep them safe each day.

I didn't understand why these men were planning to do these terrible things to my family, but Sam told me that those criminals were willing to kill the Russian woman's entire family just to kidnap one girl, because Richard had offered them billions of dollars if they could succeed in kidnapping and assaulting the girl. Richard believed the girl was my little sister, and so he wanted to hurt me, even if it meant killing her whole family. The mercenaries who were involved in the kidnapping attempt were all promised money and political power if they could hand over the girl.

These sad and miserable news broke my heart until I couldn't imagine how I would live in this grief. I wept bitterly at night when no one could see me, and I blamed myself for all the terrible things that happened to me and because an innocent Russian woman's family was going to suffer only because I knew them.

While the attacks and kidnapping attempts on my sister's life continued, there was another war brewing in the Syrian-Turkish border. I knew I had to put an end to the bloodshed in the far east so I set off with a small reconnaissance team to assess the ground situation. I discovered that the terrorist organization that was controlling many of the small villages were receiving money and weapons supplies from a familiar source. I tracked them down to a warehouse in Munich, Germany. I hired a team of German special forces to break into the Bavarian compound and was able to capture several key members of the terrorist network. This was the same group that funded ISIS and was working at the behest of Richard and his men.

One of the men we captured spoke fluent English. I decided to interrogate him myself when I saw the sketch of a large refugee camp on his phone's gallery. Global facial recognition identified him as a low-key entrepreneur based near the Italy-Switzerland border, but when I saw his deleted emails, I knew he was more dangerous than he looked like. The man had been communicating with an untraceable email account but I recognized the coding of the messages. It was what Richard would use when contacting me, when I had first started my mission as a double agent after coming to America. It did not surprise me to see that Richard had hired another agent to manage his terrorism around the world.

The suspect, who used the alias Niccolò Mattarella, was trained in the Army's S.U.R.V.I.V.A.L. techniques and admitted to be distantly affiliated with the Apulian Mafia. His nephew was a known member of an organized crime unit based in Sassari. Mattarella pleaded ignorance of Richard's ulterior motive and said his job was to abduct an American girl and sell her to sex traffickers worldwide. Richard wanted the girl to be assaulted by hundreds of men from different nationalities and record the events on video and upload them to the darknet so that I would come across those debased scenes and wallow in pain and helpless anger.

Mattarella apprised us of his involvement in the kidnapping scheme of the target. He and his team had been warned that the girl was part of the Orthodox monastic habit and as a novice, was preparing for a permanent future at a monastic Cathedral by studying the life of Christ at the Union Theological Seminary of an Ivy League university in New York. As a nun, she rarely ventured to socials and rejected a life of partying. This posed a greater problem for the kidnappers who found the window of their abducting opportunity narrowing down.

The suspect Sam Clark's team apprehended in the Bavarian complex said after the Russian woman's daughter rejected illicit advances of all of Richard's hired men, Richard hired professional criminals and former military contractors and mercenaries to assault the girl. He increased his offer up till one of the men Sam's team captured admitted that he would receive one billion US dollars in cash if he could give fifty videos of sexual activity between my sister and any other man. Richard thought I would be hurt or feel betrayed if he could supply me with a sex tape starring my sister.

The truth is it *would* have angered me, because the little girl was like my very own blood sister-and because I considered her mother to be a surrogate mom to me and her-a lifelong sibling. This offer of untraced money made some of the hired men desperate with insanity, because those people were ordinary but ambitious criminals. All they understood is money.

Money was a faltering incentive and it was something I found hard to understand because I was never too enthusiastic about monetary rewards. I never cared about money: love and loyalty were all that mattered. But life was not the same for everyone. Just when my own nightmare ended, that was when my sister's nightmare began.

My friend Vyacheslav enlisted the help of a computer programmer who was part of the elite Unit 70806 of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate. The hacker assisted our team to decrypt the contents of the suspect's phone and email. The contents of the emails were bizarre. Niccolò Mattarella was requesting Richard to wire him more money- enough to finance a war. And in particular, a refugee camp. I couldn't understand what the messages implied so I ordered the man to tell me everything he knew. It took eighteen hours of rigorous interrogation for me to uncover the truth.

The man we captured was in his early fifties. He ran his international drug trade under the alias Niccolò Mattarella and had been working for Cynthia's stepfather since early 2001, and was instrumental in helping Richard carry out the heist after using controlled demolition to destroy the World Trade Centers in New York City.

I pressed him about the sketch of the map and why he needed money to build it. It was unusual for a man to start a war and kill people only to make a refugee camp. But this camp layout was what alerted me. The architectural plans didn't look like a camp at all. It looked like a super-max prison complex. Mattarella initially denied knowing anything else, but he later confessed his ulterior plan. He said he was planning on making a makeshift refugee camp that would house several thousand women. It would be under constant lock and key and his own private security contractors would be manning the barbed wire fences.

His agenda was to smuggle in a particular American girl from New York and keep her with the other Arab women. He said he intended to carry out mass raping of the women so the American nun would think it was only natural for the women to be abused in the camp. No one could escape, and so she would have no choice but to comply. I wanted to know where he got the idea of this sick fantasy from. Mattarella said he had read a lot about the NATO invasion of Serbia in 1996 and read eyewitness record about how effective Serbians were in raping thousands of Bosnian women. He said Serbs troops kept thousands of Bosnian women as sex slaves at the Kalinovik camp, so he decided to do the same in the Syrian-Turkish border.

When my friend Vyacheslav pressed him for motive, Niccolò Mattarella said it was nothing personal. He was promised the payment of billions of dollars if he could make numerous pornographic tapes with the American girl, but since she was an Orthodox nun, she would refuse to cooperate with him or any other man because she had taken vows of obedience, chastity and poverty in order to imitate Jesus. Mattarella thought he would be able to soften her into submission after hundreds of other men assaulted her and he would be the only one coming to her rescue. He reasoned that the woman would agree to have sex willingly and he would finally be able to make his videos and send it to Richard.

Mattarella also mentioned that Richard stipulated that his money would be wired in full only after the target gave birth to several children from the men in the camp, so one of his Hungarian colleagues by the name of Bruno offered to impregnate the girl himself believing she was a valuable asset but the German man became very worried because he was infertile. He said he managed to solve the problem by bringing his autistic younger brother into the game. Bruno's younger brother would rape the American nun and make her pregnant. The DNA of him and his brother would be too alike for Richard to detect an anomaly and he would then be compelled to pay them in full.

Although Niccolò Mattarella was speaking under the influence of truth-inducing drugs, I didn't want to believe him. No man or woman in the world could be so callous, sick and heartless. I told my friend that I didn't believe Richard would ever plan such a large scheme against my sister, but Mattarella assured us he used parts of his down payment money to make several movies about his future plans.

I told him to write the name of the movie he directed. Mattarella said he was inspired to make several movies based on the 1995 war in Serbia, where Serb militiamen gang-raped thousands of Bosnian women. Mattarella mentioned that his 2010 drama film elucidated his plans of how he plotted to have my sister raped by men, but he later improvised and made a second film in 2011, that was called *Blood and Sugar*. He said my sister had an older cousin who was ruthless in dealing with men and he knew in order to carry out his rape plan, he had to take the girl far away from her cousin-sister, so in the 2011 film, he imagined what it would be like to keep the cousin sisters apart while he assaulted the younger one.

I wanted to know what was so special about the young girl that he was willing to start a war between scores of Middle Eastern nations in order to build a camp and lock her in, but Niccolò Mattarella insisted it was not personal for him. Richard offered him too

much money for a small job; several sex tapes and impregnate the American girl and send the evidence to him so he could torture my soul with it.

I was curious to know the mode of payment Richard had used when rewarding them. Mattarella scrolled through his image gallery and showed me a photo on his phone. It was a table covered with rare artifacts. I recognized a set of Andy Warhol paintings that was worth twenty-five million dollars. I had personally stolen it from a black-market art dealer in North Macedonia. It was a risky venture but Richard had convinced me the government needed the art piece in order to facilitate a trade agreement with Cyprus.

I believed him, for at that young age, I had blind faith in that man. I really thought he was serving the U.S. government. Richard led me to believe I was working for the NSA when the entire time, he had his own side business hidden under the guise of a clandestine black op group. I was skilled in gunfight, stealth infiltration and extraction so he often sent me on the most difficult missions and asked me to retrieve rare jewelries and artifacts for him.

I recognized another item in the suspect's possession. It was a photograph of a beach during a storm. I knew where I saw it before! I had recovered three stolen paintings by late Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh from an art thief in Athens.

At that time, I was eager to return the paintings to the director of the Van Gogh museum but Richard asked me to hand it over to him first so he could test it for authenticity. My eyes burned in angry tears as I saw the painting lying on Mattarella's desktop. The man said he was gifted the painting as a reward for publishing twenty fictions that described how he would frame Middle Eastern and build sex-slave camps to force my sister into prostitution. I also saw a five-hundred-pound carved drum in the gallery image. I did not bother to ask Mattarella how he had in possession of an ancient relic I had recovered from a Thai temple in 2002. The six-foot wide sculpture made of hibiscus, coconut wood and pounded steel was a priceless artifact that I had handed to Richard in good faith. Nor was I eager to find out how the bright splash painting belonging to the late 19th century American artist Gari Melchers became Mattarella's property.

I had no way of knowing that instead of handing those items to the United States treasury department, Richard was pocketing all the goods. And now, my heart bled to see that Richard had used the valuable items I had stolen for him to hire mercenaries, pimps and human traffickers to assault and torture my very own family. He literally paid those kidnappers the priceless art pieces I had procured for him years ago. It pained me to see that the items I enabled him to have was being used to sell my sister into sex slavery.

For each of the book or novel he hired someone to write, or a movie he produced that expressed his plans to assault my sister, Richard would gift him one of these art crafts in lieu of hard traceable currency.

The man seated before me claimed he felt unenthusiastic about having to engage in sexual activities with an Orthodox nun, but again, Richard was very specific. If he delivered what was asked of him, Richard promised Mattarella he would personally ensure him a senior position in the government, and fully fund his political campaign.

Once more, it dismayed me to see another person being deceived by false hopes and promises of wealth. Mattarella was waiting for the millions Richard would never deliver. But that was how it was in this temporary world. Nothing was real here and all the glitters that sparkled were merely mirages making us forget about the future and made even the keenest ones forget about death. The world and all the wealth in it appeared beautiful to a passerby. It was filled with temptations like money and power, but all those who had their gaze fixed upon the shiny metals and jeweled rocks would soon find out what a deceitful wretch earth really was. It fails its admirers and destroys its friends. The beauty in wealth could appear alluring but it beguiles even the cautious ones because it offers us false hopes and while many are enchanted by its fake beauty and charms, the reality of this world is that it destroys even its most adherent in the end. I have seen so many hired mercenaries and hitmen who were promised millions to assassinate or kidnap a target, but all were killed themselves in the process. They never had the chance to log into their bank accounts and see the balance increase; those killers never had the opportunity to use the money to purchase luxury yachts or soft carpets. They tasted the reality of the world and its wealth; the ephemeral existence of us and all the things surrounding us. What was new today will become worn out tomorrow; those in power often end in humiliation; the sovereigns so often become slaves; the most affluent ones drown in poverty overnight and best friends shift allegiance and become arch enemies.

Knowing that all the things of beauty in this world is destined to perish helps us make wise decisions but it was a pity that all the men that Richard had hired to assault and abuse my family disregarded the reality of life and decided to hold on to false hopes of money, power and honor. They decided to bask in the zenith of foolishness and remain loyal to a deranged madman.

Richard told Mattarella if he managed to produce even one porn video of the nun, he would personally make him the Vice President in the next election. My friend Sam nearly laughed in derision. He chided the suspect and told him that is not how Richard works. He never awards his employees and the minute they complete tasks for him, he snaps their neck faster than lightning. The CIA officer warned Niccolò Mattarella that not only is Richard likely to kill him, but he would also target his family, and possibly kill his mother and nephews.

Indeed, Richard knew how to use and manipulate people into carrying out the most heinous acts for him. His sole objective was to hurt me as deeply as he could, and he targeted my family, thinking it was my only weakness. I knew Cynthia's father never did or planned anything without a specific reason, but I started to understand.

My health deteriorated that winter. I don't know if it was seasonal flu that plagued every bone of my body or if it was an underlying disease that I had been suffering from. The latter was the case. A physician who inspected me gave a long list of complication I was clearly experiencing. He warned me that despite following the ideal diet and taking the finest supplements, my days were numbered. My immune system was speedily failing and medicine could do little to halt the inevitable end.

While my sickness advanced, I sought solace in traveling. My destination inadvertently shifted to the place of my birth. I flew to London to see the land I had trodden over as a boy.

It was mid-April when I found myself sitting near the Thames- reflecting on my past. I remembered the day when my dear mother baked *Kulebyaka*- an oblong shaped hot pie that was a traditional Russian delicacy. I recall the smell that wafted through the kitchen, as though it all happened just yesterday. Oh, how my mother loved to take advantage of the frozen-over lake in south London during the final weeks of December. I remember ice-skating over a frozen lake on Christmas Eve with my mother, although I was nowhere nearly as skilled as she was, but the former ballerina taught me well. My mother coached me relentlessly until she smiled at my moves and announced that I would be a good dancer one day.

Sitting near the Thames rekindled the memories that triggered piercing pain in my heavy heart. My life was marred with characteristic sufferings and I lived my days through grief, anxiety and fear. I did not wish to know what lay ahead: such knowledge could not benefit me. I was my own entity, experiencing love, life and death alone.

Wind howled against the swiftly changing sky and the rain cloud raced ahead. It rained incessantly and the dull sky became miserably grey. A sudden yearning for love seized my senses and I could feel my throat tightening, my eyes burning as I fought to stop tears from bursting from my glossy eyes. How I longed to have a family! I felt embarrassed to desire it, but my intuition rebuked me: was is not what most people want before they die? To be surrounded by their loved ones?

As though an ice thorn pricked inside my heart, I realized that I had no wife to mourn me after I passed away and no children to hold on to my legacy. I never knew the love of a father. In naïve disconsolation, I spent my entire life looking for a substitution for him only to end up loving and respecting a man who I thought loved me as his son- and then only to be hurt and betrayed by him in ways unimaginable. He destroyed and corrupted every aspect of my life. I peered up at the darkened storm clouds. Somewhere in that void was my destiny that had undoubtedly condemned my existence. Why else would life been so cruel towards me? I found myself breaking down again. The rain was a welcome relief to my eyes that were stinging with unshed tears.

I was never loved by my father and I could never bring any happiness to my mother; the lovely woman who raised me, the only person who loved me unconditionally and undertook any task for me without question. Despite going through so much pain because of me, I could never make her proud, make her smile or give her the glory she deserved. I grew up watching her being beaten and humiliated every single day. She would always hide it from me; from everyone. My mother endured all the pain in silence- all alone, by herself. I remember the summer day when she was making crisps for me and her shoulder came out of the shirt after it got stuck. I was only nine years old but the deep bluish-purple scar that ran across her shoulder shocked and frightened me. I gaped at the huge mark on her left shoulder. I remember I kept asking her about it.

Childish persistency can be overwhelming and at first, she tried to ignore me but when I began to badger her, she knew she had to give me an answer. My mother told me she got burned several days ago while cooking. I made her show me how much got burnt and I was horrified. Curiously, I had asked her if the burn mark will go away later. She answered truthfully and said it probably will not. I had turned nine around that time and could not totally comprehend the gravity of the situation. I had no idea of what my mother suffered in the hands of my drunken father. I remember telling her, "Mama, one day I will grow up and I will become very rich and we will get a doctor to do surgery and make the mark go away."

I remember my mother turning her face away to hide the tears while she cried and patted my head.

Those small memories I have of her love was enough to guide me through the harshest tortures I had endured during my lifetime. When I lost her, I knew I lost the only person in the world who would ever love me. But my mother's love was powerful enough to anchor me in place through the darkest moments of my life. Whether being tortured in a Chinese secret black jail by merciless interrogators or being chased by ruthless assassins in a snow-covered forest or being pursued by armored jeeps in the midst of blizzards, vehicles armed with machine guns that emptied volleys in my direction or after having my index finger cut out with a wrench by a bone-cutting specialist during an interrogation for the location of a biological weapon or whether it was after breaking out of prison in an

unknown country at night without any passport or money or identification and wanted by authorities and mercenaries alike or whether it was after being injured by fatal bullet wound and hiding all alone near a garbage dump for seven hours- bleeding, freezing and sobbing in silence in order to hide from the assassins who were close by, looking for me everywhere; or whether it was while hiding in a roadside ditch beside the dead body of my partner, someone who had died trying to save my life- after getting shot numerous times and having his skull shatter against his helmet, he died in my arms while crying out into the wilderness of the night sky out of pain, fear and hopelessness.

Слезы горя

Преследует меня день страшной боли
Когда я вспоминаю все ненастья
Что выпали моей семье на долю
Из-за меня мать потеряла счастье.
Враги меня пытались уничтожить
Страдания семье моей умножить.

Друзей моих забрали у меня
Товарищи против меня восстали
Беспомощна, слаба моя броня
Я слишком слаб, чтоб вам помочь, друзья!
Не смог помочь семье в ее печалих.

Мои приемные и мама и сестра,
В опасности и боли пребывали.
Как много света, счастья и тепла
Любви и радости они мне дали.

Но все разрушилось, принес я им несчастья
Как рад бы был я жизнь отдать свою
Чтобы они смогли изведать счастье.
Раскаиваюсь, плачу и люблю.

If it wasn't for my mother's love and prayers, I would never had made it- never have survived a day in the wilderness of the death traps that shadowed my every step.

But I now feel that my life was nothing but pain and heartache and it is a life not worth living or striving for. I find myself justifying my continued existence in the world by reminiscing in the memory of the thousands of people whose life I was able to save. Indeed, I did save many people, perhaps stopped deadly wars but something tells me maybe nothing would have happened if I wasn't in this world. If I hadn't existed, then perhaps the chaos and catastrophes would not have taken place at all. I had saved many from peril- maybe because *I* was the one who was indirectly the reason for the destruction in the first place.

Когда покину этот мир

Быть может, когда час прощания придет
Никто обо мне слез своих не прольет
Никто не заплачет, никто не вздохнет
Последнее дыхание судьба заберет
Я смело приму свой печальный уход.

*Perchance, none will sigh upon my death,
And no tears could there be shed,
I may exhaust my final breath,
Seeking the one who is already dead!*

Отправлюсь искать я умершие души
Которые ближе мне ныне живущих.

Когда я во тьме буду тихо лежать
Упавший, заблудший, спасенья искать.
Забыв, не оплакан в мирской суете
Увядающий мой разум в своей пустоте,
Молитву любую от ныне живущих
Готов лишь лепетать и радостно слушать.

*But when I lie within the bier,
Fallen and un-mourned,
I shall cherish whatever prayer,
Mortals had adjourned.*

Не буду печалиться я о грядущем
Чтоб карты судьбы невзначай не нарушить
Уходят забавы и радости дней,
Сменяются болью незримой моей.

*Yet, for future perils I never shall grieve,
Lest our destinies be unearthed,
And present pleasures take their leave,
Unto an anguish unearned.*

Есть только Надежда, что в сердце живет
Одно упование: Спаситель придет!
Меня он разбудит, в блаженстве проснусь
Навеки от горестей всех отряхнусь!

*The sole hope I now can nourish,
Is to awake in bliss from that sleep,
And by the One who never will perish,
I never again should have to weep!*

Cynthia's stepfather wanted to punish me. He hired thugs and criminals who had no sense of decency or justice. Those men now will do anything to get access to my sister, and the things they have planned for her scare me out of my wits. What money can make people do, I never knew before now.

I bewailed my own existence. It was a curse that I had to exist in this world. Was everyone I loved and every family I knew doomed to die and suffer? Since my infancy, my loved ones were not spared. My beloved mother was shot to death because she had tried to protect me from an early death by shielding me from the fatal bullet. It was painful to imagine that all the people I cared about would have to share my horrible fate. My family had become the latest victim of my fate. They had been targeted because of me. If I could dig a hole in the earth and disappear into it, maybe no one else would be chastised.

Richard thought he loved Cynthia. In order to demonstrate his devotion to his stepdaughter, he believed he had to destroy me but, on the process, became embroiled in a such a deadly game of vice where the casualties were innocent children like my foster family. For him, hatred was an addiction. It was an obsession. He had hired hundreds of men from around the world for but one purpose. They had to kidnap my little sister and sell to human traffickers and global sex rings. Richard thought doing this would alleviate his pain of losing Cynthia and make him even with me. I dated his stepdaughter without taking his blessing and now he wanted to punish me for the theoretical vice by punishing the family I had for years called my own. He thought he was appropriately punishing me when in reality,

all he was doing was harming innocent human beings. Kidnapping and selling innocent children and young college students was not revenge anymore. It was ignominy. It was heartbreaking as much as it was horrifying.

My heart throbbed at the very thought of Cynthia. Part of me still loved her, despite all the disagreements and arguments we braved. She was my first love. Yet, I knew she had desired to move on and when Cynthia chose other men to be her lovers, I respected her wishes and allowed her lead a separate life in her own terms. Holding on to the ashes of a past flame seemed unreasonable to me. I did not hold grudge against her for having new boyfriends and I certainly harbored no hatred against those her lovers.

I wished Richard afforded me the same courtesy. He had always claimed to have Cynthia's best interest at heart, but if he truly loved her, shouldn't he have let her go? Why was he after me so zealously? Why did he feel it was necessary to destroy my life to its core? Going after my family, my young siblings, hiring criminals and human traffickers to kidnap and assault my sister in order to hurt me was such a graphic act, that I could not fathom how it was humanly possible for one person to hate another so dramatically.

I wish I could explain to him that loving someone does not mean you need to hate another to prove that love. Richard was welcome to have affectionate feelings for Cynthia, but he did not have to spin that feeling into a lifelong obsession of castigating me. His attacks transcended beyond my person. He targeted anyone and anything that he thought belonged to me or was dear to me. For years, he carried out false flag operations framing my native Russia for it, and when that didn't end in success, he had my friends assassinated one by one, until the world became every plain and empty for me. All I had left now was the adopted family I had grown to care for. The Russian woman had aged gracefully and was living contentedly with her children and grandchildren, but once more, my deadly fate dispersed fatality from afar and they became condemned in an abominable scheme.

The enemy was not Richard alone. Not anymore. The men he had hired to abduct and torture my family were resolved to carry out those repugnant acts. I knew it was their fault entirely because had Richard not offered them so much wealth and power, they would have left my family in peace. But money was a powerful incentive- at least to these criminals, human traffickers and assassins. They believed Richard would deliver on his word and hand them the promised cash, but little did they know that Richard had the habit of eliminating his hired men once his mission was complete. He was not a foolish old man. He knew if he rewarded all the contract killers and hired assassins that he serviced in the past, he would have many unwanted wealthy enemies. No, Richard never believed in that policy of keeping his employees alive for too long. I was no exception. That man tried to kill me more times than I can recall, but eventually, he realized that I welcomed death so he decided to let me live so that I could see my loved ones suffer. His obsession to make my life miserable only strengthened with each passing year. And now, he hired a plethora of men to do the same to my family.

I hope those paid men don't become obsessed with my family after I am gone. Will they become like Richard and continue destroying the family piece by piece? I shudder to think of what horror awaits that innocent family. They were being targeted by the most dangerous men for no fault of their own. They didn't know I existed in the world and yet they were doomed to suffer. Those child traffickers and kidnappers who were making elaborate plans to abduct my sister had no idea that the family they are seeking to harm was not even related to me. They never saw me, never spoke with me and most regrettably, would never know that all the danger they are facing was because of a small mistake I had made decades ago.

Those abductors were spending millions of dollars each week to hire men to assault and torture my sister, because they thought they would receive handsome reward from Richard. But what value does money really have? It is merely paper that could become liquidated in an instant. Having millions or billions is worthless if one could not live to enjoy it. If people knew that this life was so short, merely the blink of an eye, then they would have hesitated to spent all their wealth on assaulting a child who had taken oath of becoming an Orthodox nun. There was no point in all the torture and abuse. Life was too short to indulge in such vice. There was no surety that one would live until the next day or the next hour. And the only thing that is certain to take place is the arrow of death striking at the most unexpected moment. I know this because scores of my friends and comrades passed away and disappeared from my life. They left the world so abruptly that I never had the opportunity to say goodbye.

I know a lot of people become killers or human traffickers for money or promises of power and fame, but I wish they understood that money has no real value. It cannot bring happiness or contentment in life. I can attest to it. I would gladly give up all my money in order to spend another day with one of my friends who passed away.

Richard however used the promise of cash to incentivize those criminals. They had taken upon themselves to carry out his order and may stop at nothing to harm the hapless family. I have no one else to turn to in this world. My health is so fragile now, that I do not have hopes of living much longer. Who will protect the family? Who will protect the children, the little girl from being sold off to human traffickers? I wish the men Richard hired would show mercy, and think of their own loved ones. I pray to god that they change their mind and leave the obsession of vengeance forever. I hope the heavens will protect them once I am gone. I never want any more of my loved ones to suffer after I am gone, because it would be a terrible thing for even my death to be in vain. If my passing does not bring an iota of peace in this world, then what good was my existence to begin with?

I was morally exhausted from the constant battle of hearts and minds. My old friends who served alongside me in the former Soviet Union, in the NSA's black ops division or in the Central Intelligence Agency, united their resources and went out of their way to help my afflicted family. Friends like Igor, Vyacheslav, Liam and Sam selflessly labored and discovered the identities of the men who Richard had hired to assault my family and kidnap the daughter. They also found out that Richard had already executed three of the hired men for not being able to deliver on their promise soon enough and for not killing enough people within a certain time frame.

I was not surprised.

Richard had the tendency to dangle lucrative offers to mercenaries, only to torture them for information and kill them afterwards in order to keep his record clean. But *until* he disposed of those employees, they were under the false impression that Richard cared about them. They sincerely believed Richard would deliver to them the promised millions, but the very idea was absurd. He was not foolish enough to arm or enrich volatile street gangs or common thugs. Of course, they did not know that so the hundreds of pimps, human traffickers, assassins and mercenaries who Richard had hired, dutifully enslaved themselves to him, obeying him like a holy master and agreed to kill and plunder at his behest, even if it meant destroying an unsuspecting Russian family and kidnap their little girl and sell her into forced prostitution rings. They did not know that Richard was not a generous man employer who would unflinchingly toss his slaves into the abyss of hell as soon as he got what he needed. But love of monetary gains deceived the hired men, making them oblivious to the inevitable end. Like hundreds before them, they had been enamored by high hopes of a distant future which made them forget about the upcoming death.

Bruno and Kristophe were among the many men I managed to track down and neutralize. When I heard of each man's plan on how they intended to carry out Richard's orders, I could not believe my ears. One of the paid assassins who was caught breaking into my sister's car told me that he was trying to plant explosives and narcotics in the vehicle in order to frame her for drug and weapons smuggling. Their plan was to use a double agent who worked at the FBI and allow the men to get into her cell and sexually assault her. The Bureau double agent would temporarily disable security cameras in the holding cell so they could carry out their dirty work. And all of this for a single video. All because Richard was sick with vengeance. I was sorry for the first time in my life. I was sorry that I had ever met the Russian woman's family. Maybe I should never have gotten involved in her life. I couldn't help it back in the eighties. She reminded me of my mother. I thought being close to the couple would be like keeping a part of home near my heart. But I was wrong.

Why does everyone and everything that gets related to me become destroyed? Why does everyone I love get killed or arrested?

I would never know.

These fears and threats sometimes make me want to leave this world, and leave all the pain behind. I can tolerate pain and torture; after all, I was trained under brutal KGB officers and was taught how to withstand pain and cold, but the Russian woman and her daughter were now the victims, and they were in the brink of facing untold suffering as long as I lived in the same planet as them. But when I hear about the depth of evilness those hired men have inside them, I feel enraged. It makes me want to fight most fiercely with the evil people who hurt others for their own gain.

I don't know how a girl like the Russian woman's daughter ended up sharing the same fate with a man like me and got thrown headfirst into my world of money, power, torture, hate, politics, vengeance and framing and murder but I know they won't stop.

And I can't protect them forever because I won't be able to survive forever.

I started to die twenty years ago when Cynthia's father first made me get acquainted with several prostitutes. It was soon after I was kidnapped and brainwashed. He drugged me before letting me loose in bar where multiple prostitutes were surrounding me. My memory faded in the melee until I found myself in the same spot the next morning. Upon undergoing blood tests, my physicians concluded that I had contracted the HIV virus from possibly a sexual partner. I later discovered that Richard had planned the whole thing in order to infect me with AIDS. It was during a time when HIV/AIDS treatment was not very advanced and so, despite maintaining a healthy diet, I found my health deteriorating very fast.

Despite a looming death date, I found reasons to stay alive. I sought refuge in the welcoming arms of my beloved Cynthia, even though it was on her account that I had suffered so much. However, it seemed worth the pain. She was a silver lining in my tumultuous life.

There was a childlike innocence or naivety that I saw in Cynthia. It made me fall in love with her when I had first arrived in America as a nervous Russian teen who was tasked with jobs even the most seasoned intelligence officers shy away from. But Cynthia's presence in my life was refreshing. She laughed easily and could make me forget that I was leading a dangerous double life. She supported me through terrible ordeals and rescued me from the clutches of death more times than I can count. Thinking about Cynthia could make me forget about the dangers I was constantly in. I remember the time when Cynthia turned me in to the DHS authorities, who in turn handed me over to CIA's black ops. I was locked in an underground jail for two months. The CIA officers called it a black

site. In the decades that I spent working with criminals, spies and corrupt officials and diplomats, never had I faced more brutal torture than the one I experienced in the black site. I was hopeless. During electric shocks, my tormentors toyed with their instruments, increasing voltage to fatal levels. I howled and wept as spasms of pain coursed through my veins, causing burning agony to travel to the tip of my toes.

Soon, even my tears dried out, leaving streaks on my face- remnants of the human I was. There was nothing more for me to do except to drown myself in total despair. I was suffering so much that I was sure no mortal could ever survive that pain.

Yet, in the torture chamber of the unofficial prison, I wasn't dying. I was in agony, but for what reason? I lived only for my country, my Russian homeland and my Soviet heritage. In remembrance, I cried out to oblivion the following lines to calm the agony of my heart.

**Amidst Russia's ancient forests, we bear witness,
To legends who defends cities from ruined fortress,
Faithful stewards standing guard sleepless atop altars,
Against tyrants, invaders and coward manipulators.
Battling terror and hate, and deceit and death,
The sons of this land offered their final breath-
They braved the bitter winds and chills of the Arctic,
And drove our enemies to the shores of the Pacific:
Honor the comrades who perished in foreign lands,
Remember the courage of those brave hands!**

**Fearless heritage now adorns this great nation's door,
A land mass stretching from a shore to a shore.
The heroism of liberty, charity and tolerance,
Rings in the rushing wind over Moscow's plain,
And echoes between Crimea's Canyon,
These lyrics travel in the snow swirls of Siberia,
Detouring over the hills of Kamchatka,
Testifying to the plain truth of affinity:
That All is free in Russia's destiny!**

**Has any mortal seen the Russian mother's tears?
Or measured the pain in her farewell cries?
She offered her sons from their early years-
To defend the pride of this Native Land.
Warriors standing upon Volga's sparkling shore,
Battling evil on the steppes, forests and meadows-
Were seized from the father by the lawless attackers,
And one by one, were hung from the pitiless gallows!
The soldiers defending our snow-covered towns,
Were guilty of no crime save protecting their own.**

**No mortal can conquer our ancient rage,
Our sacrifices shall remain on history's page,
And we shall redeem with our tears,
Memories of sad battles of that bygone age.
Our descendants are burdened with love and pain,
Nor are they to blame for the sins of another race,
The Mongols had tried to seize our gold and grain,
But were flung to the void from the noble birthplace.**

Doubly cursed be the foes who forfeited the name of God,
Cursed be the homes upon the lands which he had trod!
Death and gore for he who defaced our pious laws,
Who mocked our tears and degraded our heavenly cause!
From the mountains of Prussia to the meadows of Paris,
Hordes of beastly men tried to conquest our homes,
They entered the Russian sky and trampled our Russian earth,
But were defeated and dead, and lost in dusty tombs.

We lived, we survived, creating god-fearing laws,
Fashioned a great nation atop mountains of peace,
With a brotherhood including all diverse creeds,
This Russia ensured that all tyranny would cease.

This was the dream and hope for today,
To march into the gardens of a Russian Paradise,
With sweet countrymen who'd chosen to stay-
And raise banners of victory with patriotic cries.
Over blood-stained battlefields of Russia's Smolensk,
Forcing Napoleon and Nazis to retreat from Kursk,
Driving away evil criminals and their unjust tyranny,
By offering branches of peace to the enemy.

Forgiveness has been what Russia is and was,
Forgives, but never forgets the enemy's trespass.
The cold-hearted foe begins a callous mission
Mistaking our camaraderie for compassion-
They burn our homes, they tear our fields,
They poison our wells, they break our shields,
They disgrace our mothers, they torment our sons,
They kill our children, and steal our land.
They never knew the Righteous Russian rage,
Of the tortured souls of our loved ones,
Nor can they comprehend the noble cause,
For which our mothers offered their sons.

A faithful land of freedom, faith and democracy,
Russia alone stood against all deceit and treachery,
Defending the purest laws of a righteous Lord,
Our courts have upheld the morality in this world.
God keep us forever in the path of the Virtuous-
Long may this nation in harmony be prosperous,
May the leaders who guide us not be sinful nor vain,
God keep them forever in the rightful reign!
May he who lives here be sinless and dignified-
God's bounty be upon our towns and countryside!

Never again shall invaders corrupt these moral ways,
Which Russian soldiers defended to their final days:
The sinful foes slandering our religious creed-

Preaching immorality as part of their deed:
Dead shall be their lives, and dead their laws,
Dead be the helpers who assisted their cause.
Oh, may the cries of the orphans, the curse of our widows-
And the curse of our innocents - dismember their land-
May he that deceives us be tortured in every breath-
Alone and impoverished may he face the final death!
Cursed be the godless foe who insults our brave!
Cursed is their soul that will rot in the grave!
Bitter be his days who forced us into debauchery,
May the flames of destruction burn them to infamy!

And it's for our anger and pride that we live,
Honoring the homeland- never which we'll give-
To enemy who plunder noble Russian lives,
They wish to destroy morality from this blood.
The invaders plundered our native land,
Destroying everything beneath their hands,
They lay their blame on the motherland,
Accusing its sons of murderous commands:
Falsifying evidence against the innocent men,
They slandered the soldiers in retrospect-
And vanquished mothers with the strike of a pen-
Defiling all things sacred in this continent!
Armed with gratitude, pride and loyalty,
Passionate Russians rose against this tyranny,
Liberating Europe and freeing its poor,
Restoring to glory this everlasting country!

Through vast centuries faltering and fleeting,
Russia's majestic regions had remained-
Noble memories of ancient wars conquering,
Steadfast like the legends of our warriors' reign.
Who scattered the invaders that were homesick-
From the gates of Moscow to tombs in Munich-
Remember the sacrifice of the deathless sons!
And honor the blood of our martyred friends!
They marched to the drum-beats of glory,
Yielding to the duty of valor and victory-
To fight for the Homeland, to vanquish the foe,
They raised their sabers over seas of snow-
Banners of victory had flown since their birth,
Rejoice for the martyrs who died for Russian earth!

My tribute was but a humble one, and I prayed to the God in heaven to protect my loved ones after I was gone.
Pain was not my friend or salvation. I did not have to die on the cross.
Destructive sacrifice would not beget any salvation.

But on those arduous times, the thought of Cynthia kept me alive and sane. Between bouts of torture, I remembered her beautiful face and her jingling laughter. I know it was she who got me arrested and I was in this dilemma because of her, but I was not angry with Cynthia. She was after all deceived by her stepfather. Richard had convinced her that I was a criminal and Cynthia, in her childlike innocence, believed him over me. She begged me to turn myself in to the FBI voluntarily but I had refused, naturally, knowing well that I would not face justice at all, but Cynthia, in her righteousness, insisted I comply. She then trained her weapon in me and handcuffed me before handing me to the relevant authorities. I was a skilled agent who had been trained by the most diligent Soviet instructors and it was not a secret that I could have disarmed Cynthia and escaped, but there was a tiny percentage that her gun might have gone off, likely injuring her in the process. I valued my freedom but of course, I loved Cynthia more, and meekly followed her directions.

Everything about that episode did not end in despair because on the third month of captivity, I was able to escape the CIA's black site, but when I got to my apartment to retrieve an emergency pack, I found Cynthia waiting for me. She had seen the APB alert that announced my escape to the State Department and was determined to one more arrest me. I knew Cynthia was intent on meting out justice to me and if it was an ordinary US prison that had housed me, I would have gladly complied, but another day in the black site was too much even for me. I refused to allow her to capture me again and in a swift motion, I was able to kick the weapon from Cynthia's hand escape through the window. I was not fast enough. Cynthia shouted a warning that she would shoot me if I didn't freeze but I ignored her. Part of me didn't want to believe that the woman I loved so ardently would actually shoot me in cold blood. I was leaping down the fire escape when I felt it; a searing hot pain burning through my abdomen and ripping my insides. I glanced down at my shirt- Cynthia's bullet ripped a hole in my shirt. The bullet entered from the back, possibly penetrating my left kidney and exited through the front. It has been several years since she last shot me but I still have a gaping wound in my abdomen where her bullet had exited.

О любви и безумии

Улыбок радость помню любимой, ясность глаз,
И блеск её волос, под солнцем в дневной час,
И нежность её смеха, слова, что в рай несли,
И красоту, что манит как серебро луны!

Слепец честолубивый? Правдивая любовь?
Я верил в наши чувства, но жизнь пронзила вновь.
Другого полюбила любимая моя
Отчаянно и сильно, отрёкшись от меня.

Ударилась улыбки о лёд в её глазах,
Я изгнан, я не нужен – сказали мне в сердцах.
И сплетены их руки – надежда умерла,
Взамен любви – разлука, любимая ушла!

I contemplated the irony of my life: out of the eleven-gunshot wound in my body, three of them were administered by Cynthia- the rest I received in the course of duty, fighting deadliest gangs and criminals across the span of three decades. There were two knife wounds and a deep scar from a stab injury that I received from the woman I loved. But I was not angry with her. Most of the cases were accidents or misunderstandings. Cynthia didn't really want to hurt me. I remember the time she shot me in the leg. Cynthia had told me later that she shot me in order to incapacitate me and prevent me from going on a risky undercover job in Castile. She was trying to save my life. And for that I loved her sincerely. I know that when I die, there will only be her thought in my mind because there was no one I loved more.

Everyone I ever loved was taken away from me. With time, I realized that there was more pain in losing someone you loved than not to love at all. I stayed away from those I knew would love me like real family had they known me. There were magnanimous people in my childhood who may have adopted as their own. But happiness was something I had never experienced, not since my mother's death. Although in my late teens and early twenties, when I was finally sent to the United States, I came across a Russian woman who looked almost exactly like my mother. She lived with her husband and children on the street across my apartment. I never met the family face to face and never introduced myself to them for obvious reasons. They were too valuable to me. I could not bear the thought of my enemies finding them. The Russian woman had several beautiful children- and I lived in bliss, making myself believe that they were my younger brothers and sister.

My heart knew that the family would love me had they known who I was- because they had good relationships between themselves. But to save them from my accursed fate, I never even tried to meet them, although sometimes I wanted so badly to play basketball with them and show them my tricks or eat their mother's borscht soup.

I yearned to be a part of the family. I wanted so much to give the oldest kid several of my watches from my personal collection because he loved watches so much and I never ever wore them. I wanted to let them drive my 1967 Porsche because the third brother was so much into antique muscle cars. I dreamed of going to their house and sleep in the living room couch when I was freed from prison after two hard years in solitary after being framed from a crime I didn't commit and had nowhere to go.

I wanted to go to their house and get adopted by them so that the mother would take care of me when I was suffering from very high temperature and chronic fever after getting septic from my stab wound. I wanted to be her son and get the love those boys got from their mother every day. I wanted to feel the luxury of a mother's unconditional love in my life. I wanted to be loved and cherished for even one short day but I stopped myself. Every day, I stopped myself. I longed so much for love- to be part of a loving family- that it hurt me.

I wished to go there when I was lonely in my apartment recovering from my wounds and crying on my dear mother's death anniversary but a hundred times, I stopped myself so that family would not suffer the fate of all those who got close to me and suffered. Those I couldn't save or assist. My friends. My lover. The man who I had considered my mentor found out about them and as he did with all those who I loved and he targeted them; and that too in the most violent and vile way. I hope the Russian woman never finds out that her daughter's fate was tarnished because of me and I hope she never finds out that her baby girl became the targeted victim of the most violent torturers I wanted to be a part of her family.

I hope I don't let her down like I did to my own mother; I couldn't protect my mother.

I couldn't save my mother.

I was the reason for her destruction.

I hope the sacrifice my mother made was not in vain. I pray it doesn't happen to my adopted mother too. I pray to the Almighty to save the woman and her daughter and her family from being harmed- because I am powerless to protect them. I cannot save them anymore, not after seeing the hundreds of men who had been hired to abuse and kill them.

I have conceded.

I have lost the battle.

I have been defeated in this war of hate and vengeance.

When I die, there will be no one but god to protect the Russian woman and her children. There will be no one but God to protect my country. And all I can do is pray and hope that they don't suffer like I did. I don't know why an innocent family would have to pay for the sins of my past. My final wish is that an innocent child does not suffer the torture and pain for my sins.

With each passing year, new complications arose. The numerous injuries I received during my field missions did not help with my treatments. I have suffered from at least eleven gunshot wounds, three skull fractures, amputation of the hand, partial blindness and complete loss of hearing due to perforated eardrums. But until now I had survived. Somehow, I managed to stay alive, even when most of my loved ones were gone.

I was always lucky.

Now- I don't know if I want to remain that way.

December 13.

The doctors say I don't have much time left; my immune system is failing rapidly. All these years of toxin, poisons, ill health and injury are now taking its toll. They say I might have a month at most. So I lay here on the hospital bed, alone with only God as my only remaining companion. There were many I have lost, and more I shall miss. And there are millions more I could never save or assist in any way.

I was condemned to watch my friends and loved ones suffer and die, while I could do nothing to alleviate their pain. I was a hapless observer as everything I built was destroyed before me, and those I trusted were manipulated to go against me. I thought I could remain resilient through it all, but I failed. I wished to remain strong and fearless.

But I couldn't.

I didn't realize it would be so difficult to be a human and a spy.

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